

- Today is Laetare Sunday, a day of hope and rejoicing amongst the sorrows of Lent, and we rejoice today because we are now more than halfway through Lent's rigors, and the joys of Easter will soon be upon us.
- While next Sunday we will begin Passiontide with the solemn shrouding of our statues and crucifixes, forcing us to fast even from the visual consolation of our Lord and His saints, today we rejoice.
- And Holy Mother Church rejoices today not simply because our fasting is nearing its end, but because She is an expectant mother, and She knows that at Easter the number of Her children will be greatly increased through the baptism of catechumens.
- We know this Sunday and its Advent counterpart, Gaudete Sunday, primarily by the lightening of our penances and the change from violet to rose-colored vestments. In fact, at times this Sunday has been known as "Rose" Sunday.
- Interestingly, in addition to the wearing of rose-colored vestments, today is also marked by a curious, 1000-year-old papal custom. It's on this day that the Holy Father blesses an exquisite rose made out of gold that will be awarded as a gift of affection and reverence.
- In the past the golden rose was gifted to Catholic rulers, monarchs, and other notable people, but in our day, it's usually awarded to important churches and shrines around the world.
- This year, Pope Francis has awarded a golden rose to the International Shrine of Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage in the Philippines.
- This marvelous custom is derived from the ancient Christian custom of giving real roses as gifts – which Christians of the earliest centuries often did. And they gave roses to one another because of the rose's unique symbolism that is perfectly suited to the Christian life.
- You see, as Christians we are called to live in hope of the joys of Heaven, while also being ever-sorrowful for our sins and begging God's mercy. As Christians, we know all too well that, in the human heart, joy and sorrow must so often mix and mingle.
- A rose, of course, is a perfect symbol of joy and sorrow existing together, for with the beauty of the rose blossom comes the sharpness of thorns. And so today, Laetare Sunday, we are reminded that living a fully Catholic life often requires this juxtaposition of joy and sorrow.
- Think about it: Christ reminds us so repeatedly in the Gospels that we must be willing to endure the sorrow of losing our life in this world in order to gain the joys of eternal life.
- Indeed, nature itself teaches us this lesson with rose bushes, whose thorns must grow first before the lovely blossoms can be produced.
- In the same way, we must endure the rigors of Lent before partaking of the joys of Easter. We must go through the Passion of Good Friday to get to the Resurrection of Easter Sunday.
- Thus, suffering is not something to be avoided for a Christian, but embraced with hope.
- To be sure, it is the mark of a mature and holy Christian to face all sorrows, even death, with implacable serenity. As Christians, we are called to rejoice always in God's goodness and mercy, no matter what circumstances Providence should deem to befall us.
- We must have hope that, whatever it is we are suffering with now will not last forever. And that if we are willing to embrace our thorny crosses in this life, our hope will blossom into the eternal joys of Heaven!

- But all of this is predicated upon a deep and abiding faith in God. For we cannot embrace the sorrows of this life with serenity without a deep faith that God will bring good out of those sorrows.
- In the Roman Canon, we refer to Abraham as our “father in faith,” and with very good reason. Think of the sorrow this man endured with his wife Sarah, being without children until old age.
- Yet, even when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, Abraham didn’t flinch. Rather, he was steadfast in his faith, as was evidenced by his perfect obedience. And God blessed him for it, giving Abraham offspring countless as the stars in the heavens.
- While Abraham couldn’t possibly see how God could honor His promise of a prodigious progeny by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham’s faith in God was so strong that he was willing to obey anything God asked of him.
- Of course, our readings today remind us so clearly of why we should always hope in God and have absolute faith in Him.
- In our first reading we see the terrible consequences inflicted upon Israel for their failure to keep the covenant made with Moses on Mt. Sinai that we heard about last Sunday. Yet, in the end, God has mercy upon the Israelites and restores them to their rightful home.
- Our second reading from St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians also speaks of the overabundant mercy of God, a mercy that saves us even though we have merited damnation by our sins.
- So much does God love us and want to save us that He forgives whatever sins we repent of, regardless of their gravity, regardless of their number.
- And this mercy and love of God are further explained for us in our Gospel, as Jesus leads Nicodemus out of darkness and into the light of truth.
- For all of these reasons and more, we must have absolute faith in God, boundless hope in Him, and love Him above all else.
- Brothers and sisters, Holy Mother Church bids us to rejoice this day as we near the end of our Lenten sacrifices and the glories of Easter.
- But as we rejoice, let us remember Christ’s call to embrace our sufferings and crosses in life, and to do so with resolute faith in God’s goodness.
- While we should not go looking for sufferings simply for the sake of suffering, neither should we shun those sufferings and sorrows God’s providence allows to come to us.
- So, let us embrace the thorns of this life, with perfect faith that those thorns will eventually give way to the beautiful and fragrant blossom of Heaven’s glories.
- May we all one day know the golden roses of the Lord’s affection that shall be bestowed upon all the just in Heaven.