

December 11, 2011—*Gaudete Sunday*

Rejoice, rejoice ... the Light shall shatter the darkness ...



One of the most familiar sayings of the saintly Marie de la Roche would be an apt refrain for today's liturgy. At a time when the Sisters were experiencing the darkness of discouragement and disappointment, she wrote: "the darkest paths lead **to light through love** and grace." Like John the Baptist in the Gospel assigned for this *Gaudete Sunday*, Mother Marie was a consistent witness to the Light.

Glimmers of light pierce dark nights during this season, as we light the Advent wreath, string tiny bulbs on tree limbs and boughs, line our drives and walkways with *luminaria*, and place flickering candles in our windows.

Typically, these lights are seasonal decorations or pious customs, but on occasion, they may be subversive, prophetic, and even dangerous.

During the penal days in Ireland, when Catholicism was outlawed, a candle in the window was the sign of a safe home for a priest seeking refuge. Villagers told the suspicious military police that they were lighting the way for Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem. Today, the candle in a darkened window remains a sign of hospitality for strangers and the homeless seeking shelter, and a "welcome home" for friends and family from a distance.

Significantly, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa was not ultimately accomplished by violence, but by candles burning in the windows. Distressed by racial injustice, people began to pray together and, as a sign of their hope that one day apartheid would be overcome, they lit candles and placed them in their windows so that their neighbors, the government, and the world would see their passionate yearning for justice and equality. And their government did see. They passed a law making it illegal, a politically subversive act, to light a candle and put it in the window. It was seen as a crime, as serious as owning or brandishing a weapon. The irony wasn't missed by the children. At the height of the struggle against apartheid, the children of Soweto joked, "Our government is afraid of lit candles!" Eventually, those burning candles, and the prayer and hope behind them, caused a shift in South African policy. Morally shamed by its own people, the government conceded that apartheid was wrong and dismantled it without a war. It was defeated by hope, brought down by lit candles backed by prayer.*

To light an Advent candle is to say, in the face of all that suggests the contrary, the light of Providence is with us in the darkness of discouragement, of isolation, of loneliness, of discrimination, of emptiness. A candle is a protest at midnight. It is non-conformist. It says to the darkness, "I beg to differ." This Advent, Providence people who "beg to differ," who desire to make a difference, are called to light candles—

candles of hope to overcome despair
candles of peace to dispel discord and violence
candles of joy to dissipate sadness

candles of courage to ease all fear
candles of love to uproot hatred
candles of hospitality to welcome the stranger
candles of abundance to offset scarcity.

May we make God's Providence visible by becoming light in darkness.

* Related by Ronald Rohlheiser in *The Center for Liturgy*, SLU website:
http://liturgy.slu.edu/3AdvB121111/reflections_rolheiser.html

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