My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

A fellow parishioner, trying to get into the true Spirit of Christmas, has been reading the Infancy narratives in the 1st and 2nd chapters of Matthew and Luke, which I highly recommend to all of you. Then, this blessed soul strayed on into the 3rd chapters of these Gospels and came upon this weird, eccentric prophet whom we’ve come to know as John the Baptist. Then, he asked me, “Why’s the Church have to bring him up in Advent? John the Baptist takes all the fun out of Christmas”.

Well, truth be told, he stumped me with that one. It was one of those rare moments when I was left speechless. I didn’t have an answer for him. I certainly didn’t believe that the Church insinuated John the Baptist into our Advent liturgy just to take the fun out of Christmas.

So, I had to do some prayer and reflection on John the Baptist and his message of repentance. That certainly is the first component of John’s message.

Now if I have to repent, that suggests that I’ve done something wrong. That is definitely not a popular idea. One of the towering marks of this age is the absence of guilt. Few would deny that fact. Some are pleased that guilt has been dethroned, while others see it as a bad sign. The absence of guilt in today’s society makes repentance an obsolete notion. It’s a concept of the past.

Some see repentance as something that we do only if we get caught. And, of course, that has become the only American sin these days, isn’t it—getting caught. But repentance is far more than simply blurting out “I’m Sorry” when you’re caught cheating on your taxes or your test or your wife. Nor is repentance merely turning over a new leaf. It’s far more than just starting over again or changing our minds or feeling sorry for something that we’ve done or haven’t done, or even boldly resolving never to participate in certain conduct again. No, repentance means to completely turn around and go in another direction. It is to change our priorities in life, our attitude toward others. It is to travel down a completely different path.

John the Baptist was telling the people, telling us, turn toward the One who is coming after me who is mightier than I. He will break the chains of oppression and death which are the sinful conditions of your life.

We have to turn then to Luke’s account of John the Baptist, where the people ask him, “What shall we do then?” “How should we turn toward Him?” John replies, “Let the one who has two coats give to him who has none. The one who has food should do the same.” In other words, John is saying that the work of repenting begins by sharing what you have with others.

Then, Luke tells us, “Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, ‘Teacher, what are we to do?’ He answered them, ‘Exact nothing over and above your fixed amount.’ Soldiers likewise asked him, ‘What about us?’ He told them, ‘Don’t bully anyone. Denounce no one falsely. Be content with your pay.”

In effect, John is telling the tax collectors, the soldiers, and us, “Whatever your role or task is in life, do it ethically to the best of your ability. Don’t give in to the corruption and the cruelty of the world you live in. In whatever role you find yourself, give honest and just and loving service to all who come into your life.

Contrary to the opinion of our fellow pilgrim that John the Baptist takes all the joy out of Christmas, I submit to you that this weird, locust-eating, camel-hair-wearing eccentric prophet puts the joy back into Christmas. For he is the one who calls us not to Christmas the way it is, but to Christmas the way it is meant to be.

First, he tells us to look within ourselves, without paying attention to what the world says. If we’re honest with ourselves, we know that we’ve sinned and we need to repent. He tells us to take our sinning seriously. Why? Because God does?

If I may, allow me to give you an example of my early sinful ways. As a young boy, not unlike many such, though none in our parish, of course, I was fascinated with fire. I often played with matches. So much so, an uncle of mine took it upon himself, by way of teaching me a lesson, took my hand, lit his lighter, and held my hand over the flame until I was burnt. The only lesson he taught me was to hate him from that day until the day he died, when I think I finally forgave him.

I loved visiting my Grandparents’ home, a beautiful old Victorian twin in West Philly, you know, with front steps and back steps, a big breakfast room, as well as a huge dining room. One time while staying with them for awhile, when I was about 9 or 10 years old, I took to playing with matches in their grand old bathroom. I thought it would be great fun to set the roll of toilet paper on fire, which I proceeded to do. The paper went up in a great ball of fire which scared me and I ran across the room and threw it in the toilet. But there were ashes everywhere. I tried to clean them up, but those I couldn’t, I pushed under the bathmat.

Sometime later, my Grandmother discovered my devilish deed and confronted me, “Victor, what did you do?” I said, “That wasn’t me, Mom-Mom!” “Well, who made this mess then?” she asked. Now, I loved my Grandfather more than anyone in life at the time, but they all said he was a little senile, so I blurted out, “Pop-Pop! It must have been Pop-Pop!”

My poor Grandmother sat down and just started crying. I ran to her and pleaded, “Please Mom-Mom don’t cry! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” She simply hugged me and said, “Well, don’t do it again.”

Now, I don’t know if she was referring to my burning up the toilet paper or lying about my Grandfather. But, from that day on, I stopped playing with matches and loved my Grandmother and Grandfather all the more. I realized that the bad things I had done, had hurt both of them.

Only a few short years later when I was 12 years old, as my Grandfather lay dying, I prayed and begged God, “Please don’t take Pop-Pop from me. If you let him live, I’ll even become a priest for you.” Well, Pop-Pop died, but, I guess my repenting of my lying about him turned to service. Perhaps there was where my vocation with born.

You see, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, that’s why I believe that God takes our sins seriously, and so should we. They are always hurtful to ourselves or to others.

First, John the Baptist says, “Turn away from the sinful conditions and attitudes that plague you! “REPENT!”

Secondly, he tells us to make our repentance real. How? By recognizing that everything we have comes from God, and if we have more than we need for ourselves, share our abundance with others who are in need. That’s true Repentance, John says, “SHARE!”

Finally, he tells us to live moral and upright lives of service to God and our human family. That’s the fruit of Repentance. John says, “SERVE!”

John’s is the message of Advent! REPENT! SHARE! SERVE!

It is the true message of Christmas! REPENT! SHARE! SERVE!

It is the fundamental core of our Faith!

REPENT! SHARE! SERVE!