

Advent Reflections on Christian Joy

Catholic Professionals of Illinois, December 16, 2017

Very glad to be here with you this morning... The title of our first meditation is “Advent Reflections on Christian Joy”. With Christmas around the corner, and all of us on the eve of the jollity of the holiday season, this might seem like a normal Advent theme. Nevertheless, if we think deeply on it, we might be surprised that we really don’t know how to answer this simple question: are Christians supposed to be joyful? Did not Jesus teach us, in one his most fundamental sermons, the Sermon on the Mount: “*Blessed are they that mourn... they shall be consoled*”? St. Luke even says it more directly: “*Blessed are they that weep...*”, and “*woe to you who laugh now, for you will grieve and weep*”. St. Paul even goes further when he says, in 2nd Corinthians: *I rejoice now, not because you were saddened, but because you were saddened into repentance; for you were saddened in a godly way, so that you did not suffer loss in anything because of us. For godly sorrow produces a salutary repentance without regret...* So maybe we are supposed to rather practice this “godly sorrow”, and leave joy for later. Perhaps one of the most convincing of all Gospel arguments is what seems to be Jesus’ own example: in all of the Gospels, we see Jesus as deeply moved, serene, angry, even crying, but we never see Jesus laugh. The same with Mary: we have a feast day for “Our Lady of Sorrows”, but none for our Lady of Joy, or our Lady of Mirth... So a good argument could be made that Christians are not called to be joyful, at least not how we usually think of it, for we are called to carry our cross while here on earth, and receive our happiness and joy in heaven.

Another way of approaching this question comes from our life of piety. Every traditional Catholic knows that in the original 15 mysteries of the Rosary, only 5 were for sorrow, 10 were for joy (by the way, a good book recommendation: “Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy”, by Rumer Gooden, one of those old classic –and lost!– catholic books!). This seems to follow the rhythm of the New Testament, and would go something like this: joy at the Nativity, sorrow during the public life, joy at the Resurrection. That might mean

something like this for our lives: when we are little and still innocent, we are quite joyful (I imagine Jesus did laugh when he was a baby or little boy!), and we will also be joyful after our death, in heaven: without a doubt. But what about the in-between times... in other words, all our adult and religious lives? Are we supposed to go through most of our life sorrowing (persecuted, worrying, suffering)? After all, Christian life at its most basic is the imitation Christi, the imitation of Christ, and he was named "The Man of Sorrow" (Isaiah, 53, 3), and I don't think we ever find, either in Scripture or in any major spirituality, "the Man of Joy".

Nevertheless, in his letter to the Philippians, St Paul writes this to his early Christian community: *"Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice"*. Joy is the theme of much of that letter. Earlier, St. Paul writes that despite his prison chains and numerous persecutions, quote: *even if I am poured out as a libation, I rejoice and share my joy with all of you. In the same way you also should rejoice and share your joy with me.* Then, as a summary statement, he simply commands: *Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.*

So where does joy stand within the panoply of Christian attitudes? Should we always be joyful, or seldom, or dismiss it altogether while here on earth in order to await for it in heaven? I would like to propose to you three Catholic truths that I think answer this question, and can give us much thought, and work, for our Advent season.

One of the great beauties but also difficulties in the spiritual life is that in almost all everyday spiritual decisions, there are very few absolute rules. Of course, there are rules, but they usually can be broken, or suspended, or at least delayed, because of circumstances. This is why the virtue of Prudence is called the rudder of all virtues: all virtues can be misapplied, even charity, even apostolic zeal, etc. What prudence does is apply our absolute rules or principles to particular cases: it is the art of making good decisions.

There is, however, one rule that we can always follow, and that is this: a Christian should always be joyful. Not that we always are joyful, nor that we are not going to feel sorrow sometimes. Nevertheless, we always *should* be joyful: that should be our ideal and goal, and that is an absolute rule. In the

spiritual life, in the deepest parts of our soul, our being, we should always be joyful. If we are not, there is something terribly wrong. It is one of those absolute rules, and, you know what?, it is only true because we are Christians. Or maybe we could say it like this: it is only true because Jesus Christ came to earth, and revealed to us who God is, and that we are capable of obtaining Him.

It is an incredible (or hopefully not “incredible”!) truth that should inspire or motivate our entire life. Nietzsche once remarked, *“I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed”*. I think this is true. When I used to live in France, I saw this all the time, walking down the streets of Paris: most of that people had lost God, and you could see it in their faces, even their clothes. As a great French Catholic 20th Century novelist, George Bernanos, once said *“the contrary of a Christian nation is a sad nation”*. And as St. Theresa of Avila once said: *a saint that is sad is one sad saint!*

How this can be, despite what we have already mentioned, can first be seen at the very birth of Christianity. You know how Christianity started? With two heavenly words. If we remember, at the very beginning of Christianity, the angel’s first words to Mary: “hail, full of grace”: *χαίρε*, and *κεχαριτωμενη*. *χαίρε* in English means “Hail”. Well, *Χαίρε* we usually translate as “hail” when it is used as a greeting, but probably it wasn’t the most normal greeting. That would have been “shalom”, which in greek is not *χαίρε*, but *εἰρήν*. The difference seems to be at the root of shalom is a sense of peace, but certainly at the root of the word *χαίρε* is joy, because at its etymological root is *χαρά*, means joy. *Χαίρε* then meant “greetings”, or “hail”, but with a sense of joyousness. So more correctly we would translate this not as “Hail, Mary”, but “Rejoice, Mary”.

And what is the next word the angel says? *κεχαριτωμενη* we translate as “full of grace”, and that is well, because at the root of the word is *χαρις*, grace. Very literally translated it would read: “you who have been given the most grace”. But surprisingly, what do we find again in the middle of this word? *χαρά*, “joy”! because *χαρις*, grace for the greeks, also comes from the root word *χαρά*, joy. So much so that we would not be pushing it too far if we were to translate these two compact words: “Rejoice, you who has been given most joy”!

There is something very profound here. At the very beginning of our Christian culture, when everything Christian is being kicked off, the first words from heaven are not “all-powerfulness”, or “peace”, or “righteousness”, or even “love”. Isn’t it amazing that in the first two words the angel uses, these words that are going to start everything, all our Christian faith, world, and culture, there is basically just “joy”?

If we continue the Christmas story in Luke, we find that in the angels’ song, I bring to you tidings of great joy, the Greek is this: *is really ευλογιζομαι ημιν χαραν μεγαλην*: I evangelize you a great joy!

If we go to the other end of the Christian scriptural rainbow, we arrive to the Resurrection. In the Resurrection, joy is all over the place, of course: but to take a telling example, Luke 24:41, we see that the apostles were so overjoyed they couldn’t even believe it (*non credentibus prae gaudio –χαρα*)! And in John 20:21, there is only one way the evangelist describes the disciples when they saw Jesus for the first time in the upper room: *εχαρησαν*.

At the very heart of the Christian message, and at its origin, the overwhelmingly powerful concept is joy. It is joy that is made available to us not because of our own merits or efforts, but from what is entirely a gift from heaven: grace (*χαρις*!). It is what Christianity brings to the “old world”, the world that Paul described once as, quote (Ephesians): *“Remember that at one time you were without Christ... strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world”*. In his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI once wrote: *“What did Jesus actually bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity, and a better world? What has he brought? The answer is very simple: He has brought us God”*. This is so true. He brought us the true God, that is all-good, and that decided, in his utterly unfathomable freedom and transcendence, to make that good available to us.

So the first of our three conclusions is this: at the very beginning and at the very heart of the Christian message, is God’s gift to us, Jesus Christ, but in a more “me to you” sense, is grace, and the stuff of grace, is joy. We should therefore be joyful, because we are creatures of grace: we have been reborn, by

grace, into joy. We should be joyful, because God wants us to be, and had made it available to us.

You know, one of the problems with our spiritual lives sometimes is that we don't really know how to speak about what we want, or feel. When speaking about joy, it is probably the case that we aren't quite sure if we are talking about a feeling, or a state of being... if when we say joy, we really mean happy, or –who knows- a whole host of other emotions that we name: being content, peaceful, blissful, jolly...! In this of trying to define joy, we could go on a long time, but I think that would be more a philosophy class than a spiritual talk and spiritual retreat. Let me just make a simple statement, based on St. Thomas Aquinas: we all necessarily desire to be happy (beatitudo). We become happy when we desire the good, and obtain it. Finally, we experience joy (gaudium) when we are happy. As simply as possible: we desire the good, to be happy, which causes joy.

Now one of the beautiful things about how God made us, is that, surprisingly enough, happiness, like joy, isn't something that is supposed to be pursued, we might say, selfishly... Only the good is. One of the great books of this century is Victor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning". In it, he says, from an experiential and a psychological point of view, the same thing as St. Thomas Aquinas. Let me quote: *success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it...*

So when I say that one of the absolute rules of the spiritual life is that we *should* be joyful, and that if we are not, something is wrong, I am not saying that we should pursue joy at all costs. What we should search for, with all our strength, is the good. That is the absolute imperative: *bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum*, St. Thomas says in his Summa: the good should or must be done and sought, evil should or must be avoided. This is agreed to even by most non-christian moral theologians. Joy, therefore, is a

secondary thing, an effect: it comes from a disinterested, unselfish, search for the good. But if we do relentlessly pursue the good, joy is the result.

Now what does all this mean? If we go back to our original question, should a Christian be joyful, the answer is unquestionably yes. That doesn't mean, however, that we always feel joyful: often we permit evil in our lives, and often we permit that the evil that does exist in the world corrupts us: it is what we call sin. On the other hand, Jesus never sinned, but he *was* the "man of sorrows" especially during his passion, but probably also during much of his life, because his mission was to *confront* evil, and as St. Paul says in that mysterious phrase of II Corinthians 5:22, even to be made sin for our sake: *For our sake he (God) made him (Jesus) to be sin who did not know sin.* To search only for the good in a world whose prince is the Devil is to bring sorrow into our lives, sorrow that is necessary because we are not yet in heaven. But sorrow is not evil: in other words, suffering does not mean that we are not joyful: in the depths of his soul, I am sure that Jesus always experienced a deep joy. As the Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand says in his book "Transformation in Christ": *«The largest obstacle to cheerfulness isn't sorrow but pride.»* We might rephrase that and say: the main obstacle of joy isn't sorrow, but pride; the opposite of joy is not sorrow, but despair, or discouragement.

That is why joy is such an appropriate theme for our Advent season. Advent is the time when we search for Jesus, for a greater Advent of God into our lives. It is the great season of hope, and searching. In that searching, however, there is much repentance to be done: the greater our zeal for that search, probably the greater suffering we will permit ourselves to undergo.

So let this be a second point that we can take from this retreat: joy is always worth whatever suffering I may have to endure to achieve it, and in this life, suffering is almost for sure a necessary path. Here we see what seems such a paradox in the lives of so many saints, and martyrs: suffering, they are joyful (we might even say, because they suffered, they were joyful). Just as an example we might quote St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta: *I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.* Again: "For

the first time in 11 years I have come to love the darkness, for I believe that it is a part of Jesus' darkness and pain on Earth... Today I felt a deep joy, that Jesus can't go through the agony anymore, but that He wants to go through it in me". St. Damien of Molokai, the saint of the Lepers, said this and similar things often: *Having the Lord at my side, I continue to be happy with cheerfulness of heart and a smile on my lips.*

Finally, for our third conclusion, let us go back to our everyday lives. Most of us, probably thanks be to God, will not be called to suffer martyrdom, or great sufferings: God has a path for each soul. All of us, however, will be asked by God to be witnesses of that Christian joy that Nietzsche said he couldn't see in Christians. Well, one of the ways to manifest that joy is to be what in the spiritual life is called "cheerfulness". That is a third rule that I think also always holds: always be cheerful. Cheerfulness is much more exterior than deep internal joy (*gaudium*); usually the latin word to translate late it would be *hilaritas*, from which we get our word "hilarious"¹. But it doesn't mean we always have to be hilarious: it means we should always be cheerful: a very easy way to think of this is that we should always be smiling. Not always smiling stupidly, but quick to smile, or perhaps, with a smile on our hearts. One of the most beautiful images of this that I have seen was during a funeral. Amidst the tears of a young lady who had just lost her father, a smile broke out for her siblings and her mother as the priest preached words of hope and heaven: "smiling through the tears", she seemed such a beautiful example of what a Christian should be.

A good example of this, again, is Mother Teresa of Calcutta: . She says: *Let us always meet each other with smile, for the smile is the beginning of love, or more simply, Always have a cheerful smile. We shall never know all the good that a simple smile can do,* said Mother Teresa. Why is this so important? It may seem the most strange of notions, but this kind of cheerfulness for other, what St. Thomas calls *affabilitas*, affability, he places under the cardinal virtue of justice, the virtue that prompts us to give to others what is their due under any sense of

¹St. Paul says that *Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful (ἡλαρός, hilaritas) giver.* ~ 2 Corinthians 9:7.

duty or obligation. In other words, being cheerful, smiling, is a way of being just towards others: since we are obliged to help and not hinder others around us in the world on their way toward Heaven, being cheerful is a great help, and being despondent, sad, is a great discouragement. In other words, we should be cheerful out of charity, and even out of justice! St. Francis de Sales tells his readers, *“we should contribute to holy and temperate joy and to pleasant conversation, which may serve as a consolation and recreation to our neighbor, so as not to annoy him with our knit brows.”* And Paul Claudel (1868-1955), poet, dramatist, diplomat and fervent Catholic, said, *“Tell them their only duty is cheerfulness! Because joy is the sign that we love God, and thus we do a great good for others and for ourselves. We must be happy, and others should know that we are.”* Being cheerful is thus being an apostle; it is being, not a clown, but a prophet of our future times. *Every time you overcome temptations to discouragement, every time you show a cheerful, generous and patient spirit, you bear witness to that Kingdom – which is yet to come in its fullness – in which we shall be healed of every infirmity and freed from every sorrow.* ~ John Paul II. Cheerfulness is our testimony that whatever happens, we have hope, hope that God’s providence is always there to help us and to finally conquer.

As we conclude, let me give a personal experience I had of this, being a young seminarian. At the time, I was quite a spiritual mess: I was pretty depressed, sad, moping around: the discipline, the monotony of the seminary life, the sacrifices I had accepted to live this life, they were just getting to be too much for me. It went on for quite some time: how could I be cheerful, or joyful, when I was so wretched? Then I remember reading a passage from John 16: *Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy. When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world. So you also are now in anguish. But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.*

Well, I noticed that the Gospel spoke of how we grieve for a moment (and *that* I could relate to), but how this grief eventually turns into joy, and even compares this in some ways to a mother’s pain, and then joy, at giving birth. I

thought, okay, very well, but how long is this *labor* going to have to last?! I had been a pretty joyful kid, adolescent, and young adult, and I just didn't know if I could hold out for some future joy... it might take too long! But then I noticed something else. In verse 22 it says in English: *so you also are now in anguish* (*tristitia* in Latin, *λυπη* in Greek: means basically "sadness"). There are those "now" moments when we do simply will have to put up with the sadness and sorrow of this world. But at looking closer at the passage, I noticed that there was another word in the original added just before sadness, that was not in the English translation: *μεν* in Greek, *quidem* in Latin: it means "a certain kind of", so a better translation would say: so now you have a certain kind of or a weird kind of sadness. That was it! I understood, or received the grace to understand, that that the true Christian, the one really given over to Jesus and his charity, can never be *really* sad, absolutely sad. He will not always have gladness and delight (which I wanted: just wanted to have fun!), just as a mother in childbirth cannot be said to be in a delightful mood (nor us when we have to go through some pretty terrible things). He will, nevertheless, always be joyful, in the most inner part of their spiritual hearts, because the spiritual heart can always rejoice when it knows it is accomplishing God's will, when it is searching for the good. It is a paradox, it is kind of weird, but it is nonetheless real and true. And I started smiling again!

So should we always be joyful, even cheerful? Yes. We may, no we surely will, have to endure moments of "a certain kind of sadness", but it can and should in no way blot out a much more powerful interior sense that in the end, even this life is joyful, because we have God, because we have grace. The first three fruits of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, and peace, and even if they are meant to be perfected in the afterlife, these are meant principally for this life.

One of my favorite theologians is Von Balthasar. Paraphrasing him, he says the following: that every Christian finds his vocation in his or her participation in the entire paschal mystery of Jesus, passion, death, and resurrection. Whether Jesus will ask us to live more the passion part of that mystery, or more the Resurrection part, depends on the vocation of each one of us. But the Pascal Mystery is a whole: whatever part in it Jesus asks us to live,

in the end it is a mystery of life, and love, and therefore, of joy. Our destiny as Christians in our everyday lives is a Pascal mystery, and therefore, a mystery not of sadness at all, but of joy.

As a conclusion (how many times have I said that?!) let me add just one last thing, very practical. What can we do, practically, when we do feel sad, when we don't want to smile? Well, first there is what I call "smile therapy (explain).

Secondly, there is a surprising piece of advice from St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas, who is considered usually such a fuddy-duddy and spoil sport, taught (in the Summa Theologica) that there are five powerful remedies for sadness. The first and the strongest is to pray, to contemplate truth, in particular, to think about the Four Last Things (Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell), especially on Heaven, as that is the place we were created to inhabit in eternity. St. James supplies practical advice: "Is any one of you sad? Let him pray" (Jas 5:13). The other four are also beneficial, and even more surprising. They are, as given in the Summa Theologica: 1) A warm bath and naps; 2) Weeping; 3) Tell about your sufferings to those who will be compassionate toward you; and 4) Do things that afford you pleasure, like playing games, which bring enjoyment not only to the body, but especially to the soul. This last remedy is classified as a genuine virtue, called in Greek eutrapelia (L. iucunditas, attached to the virtue of temperance), which St. Thomas discovered in Aristotle, who defined it as: "The habit of a pleasant and cheerful turn of mind."

Summary:

- 1) We should be joyful, because God wants us to be, and has made it available to us.
- 2) Joy is *always* worth whatever suffering I may have to endure to achieve it
- 3) Always strive to be cheerful and affable: or, smile a lot.

And don't forget to take warm baths and play some games you like, when you feel down in the dumps!