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Christian Joy

"Christian joy is the consequence of possessing God through faith and charity; it is the fruit of living all the virtues." A new article on Christian life.

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Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice (Phil 4:4). Saint Paul exhorts the Christians at Philippi to always remember that *their citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20)*, while striving to ensure that their *manner of life be worthy of the Gospel*

of Christ (1:27). Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility, looking not to one's own interests but to the interests of others (2:3-4). The Apostle speaks of joy at a time when he himself is in chains and those receiving his letter are also undergoing hardships and trials (cf. 1:28-30).

Hence for Christians joy is not the result of an easy life without difficulties, or of one's current circumstances or state of mind, but a deep and constant attitude that is born of faith in Christ: *we know and believe the love God has for us (1 Jn 4:16).* The Christian message has as its aim to lead us into communion with God so that *our joy may be complete (1 Jn 1:4).*

God wants us to be happy. He has created us for eternal life, already begun here on earth through grace and that will reach its fullness in

heaven, when we will be united to God forever: “Although man can forget God or reject him, He never ceases to call every man to seek Him, so as to find life and happiness.”[1] Thus “the joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.”[2]

The Gospel recounts to us many meetings that are a source of joy: the Baptist leapt with joy in the womb of Saint Elizabeth on sensing the presence of the Word Incarnate (cf. *Lk 1:45*); the shepherds receive the good news of “great joy”: *for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Lk 2:11)*; the Magi, on once again seeing the star which led them to the King of the Jews, *rejoiced exceedingly with great joy (Mt. 2:10)*; the joy of

paralytics, the blind, the lepers, and all kinds of sick people who were cured by Jesus; the joy of the widow at Naim on seeing her son brought back to life (cf. *Lk 7:14-16*); the joy of Zachaeus, reflected in his deep conversion (cf. *Lk 19:8*); the joy of the Good Thief, amid his physical anguish, when he learned that he would be with Jesus in his Kingdom that very day (cf. *Lk 23: 42-42*); and especially the joy of Mary Magdalene, the disciples at Emmaus, and the Apostles in the presence of the Risen Jesus. Only the rich young man's meeting with Jesus does not lead to joy, since he used his freedom badly and decided not to follow the Master. And he *became sad, for he was very rich* (*Lk 18:23*).

What is joy?

Joy is a passion or emotion produced by coming to possess the good that we love and desire. It is a feeling of

pleasure that is not merely a matter of the sense appetites, but is imbued with rationality. As Saint Thomas Aquinas explains in his Treatise on the Passions in the *Summa Theologica*: “we do not speak of joy except when delight follows reason; and so we do not ascribe joy to irrational animals, but only delight.”[3] Joy is spiritual pleasure that comes from possessing the good that one has previously loved and desired. Hence it is possible to feel pleasure without feeling joy and even to feel pleasure and sadness at the same time. When Aquinas poses the question of whether joy is a virtue, he responds by saying that it is not found among the theological, moral or intellectual virtues. “Hence joy is not a virtue distinct from charity, but an act, or effect, of charity: for which reason it is numbered among the Fruits (*Galatians* 5:22).”[4]

Christian joy is the consequence of possessing God through faith and charity; it is the fruit of living all the virtues. In a Christian who lives by faith, joy is not a matter of one's temperament or physical well-being. "The cheerfulness you should have is not the kind we might call physiological good spirits—the happiness of a healthy animal. You must seek something more: the supernatural happiness that comes from the abandonment of everything and the abandonment of yourself into the loving arms of our Father-God" (*The Way*, 659).

In the message of Saint Josemaria, joy is an important part of following Christ, and a characteristic feature of the spirit of Opus Dei: "I want you to be happy always, for cheerfulness is an essential part of your way" (*The Way*, 665). Both *The Way* and *Furrow* have chapters dedicated specifically to the topic of cheerfulness. And in

the two published volumes of his homilies (*Christ is Passing By* and *Friends of God*), we find section headings entitled “Bright and cheerful homes,” “The joy of Holy Thursday,” “Sowers of peace and joy,” “Cause of our joy,” “Humility and joy,” and “God loves the cheerful giver.”

Foundation of joy

Joy is one of the fruits of the action of the Holy Spirit in our soul, which above all results from identifying ourselves with Christ and addressing God as *Abba*, Father: *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rom 8:14)*. Acknowledging our filial dependence on God is “a source of wisdom and freedom, of joy and confidence.”^[5] As Saint Josemaria insisted: “If we truly realize we are beloved sons of our Heavenly Father—as indeed we are!—how can we fail to always be joyful? Think about

it” (*The Forge*, 266). “Sadness is for those who do not consider themselves to be children of God” (*Furrow*, 54).

Christian joy is born, therefore, from knowing we are God’s children.

“Cheerfulness is a necessary consequence of our divine filiation, of knowing that our Father God loves us with a love of predilection, that he welcomes us, helps us and forgives us” (*The Forge* 332). And our joy is strengthened by fulfilling the divine will: “Accepting the will of God wholeheartedly is a sure way of finding joy and peace (*The Way*, 758). God’s will may be painful and mysterious at times, but a person who lives by faith knows that *for those who love God all things work together for good (Rom 8:28)*.

Saint Thomas More wrote to his daughter Margaret from his prison in the Tower of London: “My beloved

Daughter, let not your soul be disturbed by anything that may happen to me in this world. Nothing can happen except what God wills. I am very sure of that, no matter what may happen, no matter how evil it may seem, it will truly be the best thing.”^[6] In a similar vein, Saint Josemaria said: “God is my Father, even though he may send me suffering. He loves me tenderly, even while wounding me. Jesus suffers, to fulfil the Will of the Father” (*Way of the Cross*, First Station, no. 1). Thus joy is compatible with painful circumstances, with hardship and adversity. Since sanctity consists in identifying oneself with Christ, the Cross is inevitable in every Christian’s life. Saint Josemaria even liked to say that joy “has its roots in the shape of the Cross” (*The Forge*, 28).

Opposite of joy

The emotion opposed to joy is sadness, caused by not possessing the desired good. If the origin of joy is love (as we saw above, it is an effect or act of charity), the source of sadness will be selfishness. Saint Thomas points out that sadness “has its origin in a disordered love for self, which is not a special vice, but the common root, as it were, of all the vices.”^[7] It is not, then, suffering or hardships that are opposed to joy, but sadness, which can arise from a lack of faith and hope when confronting these painful situations. Sadness is a sickness of the soul that can arise from a physiological cause (illness or exhaustion) or from a moral cause: from freely committing sin and a lack of correspondence to grace, which could lead to spiritual sadness and lukewarmness.

Saint Josemaria put us on guard against the danger of sadness, which he considered an “ally of the enemy.”

“You aren’t cheerful? Think: there must be an obstacle between God and me. You will seldom be wrong” (*The Way*, 662). Besides, those who truly realize they are God’s children cannot permit personal sins to lead them to become sad, since they can always have recourse to the merciful love of the Father: “When you feel oppressed by your weaknesses don’t let yourself become sad. Glory in your infirmities, like Saint Paul” (*The Way*, 879). “Sadness is the end product of selfishness. If we truly want to live for God, we will never lack cheerfulness, even when we discover our errors and wretchedness” (*Friends of God*, 92).

Pope Francis warns of a danger that can lead us to lose our joy “The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the

feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.”[8]

Joy and charity

One of the first Christian writings states that “every happy man works well, thinks well, and detests sadness. But the sad man always works evil.”[9] Since joy is an effect of charity, whoever strives to stay close to God, infinite Charity, and to respond to his call to be holy, finds his or her heart overflowing with peace and joy. “If we live our lives in this way, we shall be bringing peace to the world. We shall be making God's service attractive to others, because ‘God loves a cheerful giver.’

Christians are ordinary people, but their hearts overflow with the joy that comes when we set out to fulfil, with the constant help of grace, the will of the Father” (*Friends of God*, 93).

We all need to see cheerful faces alongside us. Pope Francis, in the text cited above, diagnosed the danger of the selfish sadness that an exacerbated consumer society can cause; and he points indirectly to the antidote: concern for and service to others. Living alongside others in the family, at work and in society are constant opportunities to do good and sow joy: “To give oneself sincerely to others is so effective that God rewards it with a humility filled with joy” (*The Forge*, no. 591).

Vicente Bosch

[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 30.

[2] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 1.

[3] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 31, a. 3.

[4] *Ibíd*, II-II, q. 28, a. 4.

[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 301.

[6] Saint Thomas More, *Un hombre solo. Cartas desde la Torre* no. 7, Madrid 1988, p. 65

[7] *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 28, a. 4.

[8] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 2.

[9] *Shepherd of Hermas*, 3, 2-3.

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