

Source of Joy

Christians should be truly joyful. Christian optimism is based on the fact that a royal way to the greatest good of all has been opened up to us: the way to God.

03/04/2015

Human love is something real and true, and at the same time it is a sign or analogy of God's love. Perhaps a good way to understand Christian happiness is to compare it with the joy of people in love. They are cheerful not in spite of encountering

suffering, but indeed because of it, in the constant watchfulness, the loving care for another by which a person becomes fulfilled. People in love, if they are loved, if they give themselves to their beloved and receive the gift of love, are happy: they sing for joy. For the same reason children are particularly joyous, because their life consists of receiving love, particularly from their parents, but also from almost everyone, because almost everyone loves children.

Doesn't happiness mean believing in a "happy ending"?

The historical consequences of the Incarnation, the Word being made flesh, are so strong that the world cannot live without Christianity. But, down through the ages, some part of this world has always dedicated itself to blackening the Christian message. Thus at some times we find

Christianity being accused of preaching death, renunciation, sadness, and abandonment of the world. At other times, when for some reason or other history enters into an era of despondency, the optimism of Christianity is held to be oppressive. How can these Christians be so happy, how come they have no doubts, no underlying anguish? Their confidence in a happy ending must surely be frivolous and superficial. And so, as could be expected, Christians are accused of being sad and of being cheerful, of being gloomy and of being brazenly light-hearted, of being defeatist and of being triumphalist. If sacred music becomes complex, polyphonic, and rich, the reaction is "The austerity of the beginnings has been lost." If it becomes solemn, then "They sing songs of death, not of life."

The paradoxes of Christianity

When these simultaneous and contradictory attacks come, it shows that the accusers have not understood the "scandal" and "madness" of Christianity. In an essay called "The Twelve Men" in his book *Tremendous Trifles*, Chesterton wrote: "The true result of all experience and the true foundation of all religion is this. That the four or five things that it is most practically essential that a man should know, are all of them what people call paradoxes." Christian joy is a paradox. The counsel that Christ gave is a paradox: when you fast, look cheerful, use perfume, show how far you are from being sad. Of course someone who is cheerful when they fast may easily be accused of hypocrisy – but only because the accuser has not understood the paradox.

It is always good to give attackers the benefit of the doubt, and try to

understand their reasons. For one thing, we should realise that intelligent people love complexity, because hardly anything is all the same colour, or drawn without shading. To proclaim flatly that "everything is simple" upsets people who fear that apparent clarity may really be a mask of superficiality. Saying that "Christians are happy" produces dissatisfaction in those who think that it cannot be as simple as that.

And it isn't. The fact that Christianity has been attacked from different and opposing sides shows, at the very least, that Christianity is something that is difficult to take in at a glance. Showing that something is simple does not mean dumbing-down. Something that is straightforward is something in the open, not hidden; but the thing that is not hidden may be complex. This is the case of

Christianity, and specifically, of Christian cheerfulness.

Joy

The classic term for cheerfulness is joy, or the Latin *gaudium*, the term generally used in the Vulgate translation of the Greek word χαρις (*charis*). This Greek term can also mean gift, prize, alms or grace. And from this root we get the words gratitude, gratis – the response to a favour freely given – and the word grace, a free gift, constantly used in theology to signify a gift of God.

Grace is something obtained without effort on the part of the recipient, hence in some Latin languages the word for thanks – *grazie, gracias* –, and the English "grace before meals" and "grace after meals." In all cases it is an expression of gratitude. Joy, happiness, is the result of possessing a great good that can only be

received as a free gift. And the highest gift of all is love.

Giving thanks

St Josemaria's book, *The Way*, with its deep Christian roots, cannot but reflect this rich vein of cheerfulness. Point 268 says, "Thank him for everything, because everything is good." It is a fundamental text on cheerfulness and joy. The result of giving thanks for everything is great joy, as the Gospel loves to make clear: the angels at Christ's birth announced *a great joy* (Lk 2:10); the disciples, comforted by the blessing of Christ, who had returned to his Father, felt *great joy* (Lk 24:50-52).

Asking for help

For all these reasons, Christians should be decidedly cheerful. Christian optimism is based on the fact that a royal road to the greatest good of all has been opened up to us,

and that "greatest good" is God. Therefore permanent pessimism cannot be a Christian attitude. To think that everything is so bad, the human heart so corrupt, that "not even God can save it", is a form of pride, of self-adoration. This type of pride also shows up in human relationships: people who are chronically sad do not let themselves be helped, but think they are so complex that nobody could ever sort them out. On the other hand, there is nothing pleasanter than someone who lets themselves be helped, not servilely but with the open attitude of: "I don't know this, please can you teach me?"

In the shape of the Cross

On the other hand, thinkers such as Kierkegaard or Unamuno, and all those who in one way or another have talked about the tragic meaning of life, have sensed, whether clearly

or obscurely, that in this history, in this world, man's happiness can never be complete. Joy is the consequence of achieving a good; what is more, a good that is given gratis, given out of pure liberality. But in all the history of this world, among all the creations of men or the goods of nature, there is no eternal good to be rejoiced over, for the one eternal good, God, cannot be seen, and so cannot be possessed or enjoyed completely in this life. We come to a paradox once more. This paradox was often pointed out by St Josemaría in the phrase "happiness has Cross-shaped roots".[1]

To understand this better we need to bring together several of the ideas already mentioned. For example, there is the connection between happiness and childhood. It is not surprising, then, to find in *The Way* that the root of cheerfulness is in knowing that we are children of God.

This is found in the two chapters that deal with "Spiritual Childhood." For example, point 659 can be read in the light of point 860. The first runs, "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 abandoning everything, including your own self, into the loving arms of our Father-God." The other one, 860, reads: "Before God, who is eternal, you are a smaller child than a little toddler is before you. And as well as being a child, you are a child of God. Don't forget it."

In *The Way* cheerfulness is linked to accepting God's will, but not in a mere passive, cold acceptance. The will of God is the will of our Father, and we know that good fathers want to give their children whatever will make them happy, so long as it is

good for them. But the key is that it should be good for them. We human beings are always tempted to manufacture a world to our own liking, which means our own selfishness. That is why we do not realise the true condition for joy in this world. It is described in *The Way* in clear strokes: "The joy of us poor humans, even when it has a supernatural motive, always leaves an aftertaste of bitterness. What did you expect? Here below, suffering is the salt of life" (no. 203). And then, from another point of view, penance is called "joy, in spite of its hardship" (no. 548). That is why we must welcome tribulation wholeheartedly. "If you receive tribulation with a faint heart, you lose your joy and your peace" (no. 696).

Little by little the inseparable connection between cheerfulness and the Cross begins to appear,

especially if we understand that, as St Josemaria points out with profound theological sense, the term "cross" should only be used of the true Cross, the Cross of Christ. This idea appears constantly in *The Way*. "If things go well, let us rejoice, blessing God who gives us increase. And if they go badly? Let us rejoice, blessing God who allows us to share the sweetness of his Cross" (no. 658). Perhaps the highest point is reached in the chapter entitled "The Will of God": "Accepting God's will wholeheartedly is a sure way of finding joy and peace: happiness on the Cross. Then we realize that Christ's yoke is sweet and that his burden is not heavy" (no. 758). Why? Because the person who accepted God's will to the utmost was Christ, and his acceptance led him to death: death on the Cross. And he is God the Son, the Word of the Father. For this reason Christians, children of God in the Son, necessarily have to pass

through the Cross to understand the roots of cheerfulness. When we do, we realise that, without ceasing to be a yoke and a burden, the yoke is not a yoke, and the burden is not a burden. And we recall once again the paradox in all its force.

It is not possible to keep in mind all the facets of the Christian view of life simultaneously. When the fact of being God's children was linked to the Cross in the previous paragraphs, no reference was made to another equally inseparable element: love. Only love makes it possible to accept the Cross. As St Teresa of Avila wrote in her *Foundations*, "This is the strength that love has if it is perfect: we forget about our happiness to make the one we love happy." This is an age-old human experience, and there is no reason for it to be different with divine love. St Josemaría used to like the song of Juan del Enzina, that went: "Better

exchange / pleasure for sorrows / than be without love." Love is never restful, because "the heart is on the watch" always, as we read in the Song of Songs (5:2); which Fray Luis de Leon glossed beautifully as: "love's care is great, so watchful over its desired, that from a thousand yards it can feel it, in sleep it can hear it, and through walls it can see it."

As said earlier, human love is something real and true and, at the same time, it is a sign or analogy of God's divine love. To understand Christian joy and cheerfulness we need to recall the joy and happiness of a lover, not in spite of sufferings, but precisely *in* sufferings, in restlessness, in constant vigilance. This cheerfulness is far from superficial; this happiness has nothing to do with frivolity; this joy is deep-seated, it is a loving care in which the person finds fulfilment.

Now we can see better, perhaps, why presenting Christianity as sad and gloomy is to falsify the supernatural reality of faith. "True virtue is not sad or disagreeable, but pleasantly cheerful" (*The Way*, no. 657), with the cheerfulness that comes from loving, the pleasantness that seeks to please the beloved. Another part of the same book speaks of the "lovable gaze of Christ." In the light of this we can understand point 661: "Long face, rough manner, ridiculous appearance, unfriendly attitude. Is that how you hope to inspire others to follow Christ?" Or in another place, "Don't be gloomy. Let your outlook be more 'ours' – more Christian" (no. 664).

The Way, like all the great books of spirituality that deal with the reality of Christian life, avoids the trap of a facile optimism-pessimism dichotomy, or the oversimplifications of "the best of all

possible worlds" (Leibniz) or "the worst of all possible worlds" (Schopenhauer). In this world sin exists and persists: offence against God, shown in pitiless utilization of our fellow-creatures. But sin is not the ultimate reality, and it is not what defines this world. The ultimate reality is the Cross, the Resurrection: the supreme redemptive suffering that provides an opening for joy, now as a promise, and eventually as complete possession. The suffering of the Cross is victory, a hard-won victory that continues throughout history in the chiaroscuro of human freedom, which is the chiaroscuro of happiness and joy.

[1] *La alegría tiene sus raíces en forma de Cruz.* See for example *Christ is Passing By*, no. 43. It is an

expression St Josemaría used frequently.

pdf | document generated automatically from <https://opusdei.org/en/article/source-of-joy-and-happiness/> (02/12/2026)