

TRUE CHRISTIAN JOY

The opening word in the entrance antiphon for this Sunday is "REJOICE!" This Sunday is the midpoint of Lent. For many "rejoice" is the perfect word since Lent is now half over. It won't be long before they can get back to normal living with no fasting, giving up this or that, etc. For others, this is a sign of what Lent is really all about, a preparation for celebrating the greatest event in the history of mankind, God, through his son, redeeming a fallen human race and not only that but showing what awaits every human being, a final resurrection and life eternal. This is truly a reason to rejoice!

There is a certain novel in which the author puts on the lips of one of his characters a stinging challenge: "You say you are a Christian. Then where the devil is your joy?" For many a non-Christian or even a pagan, this is the real scandal. They do not demand that every Christian be a hero simply because they are Christian. They may not even expect one to be good at all times. But they do expect that a Christian be happy, be joyful. Joy is and must be a hallmark of being a true follower of Christ and even more so for one who is Catholic for such a person believes in the church Christ founded on his Apostles and hopefully tries to live up to his beliefs in Christ.

What is Joy? How does it differ from happiness? 1) Joy, true joy, is a quality of living; it flows from life. 2) For a Christian, and especially a Catholic, joy flows from eternal life, from a life without end. 3) Most important, this life without end has its beginning now. True joy never just disappears. It can exist even in the worst of times, even through catastrophes. For joy is a quality of life, not in any way just a feeling. Even should one face imminent death, as long as there is still life, one's joy will help one to hang on knowing through faith that life does exist after death and even more, that one day it will be eternal. Joy also presupposes a deep living faith. Happiness on the other hand is all feelings and these can evaporate in a second. While everyone wants to be happy at all times, one also knows that this will never quite happen which in turn keeps one always trying whatever is at hand to keep happy. And everyone knows where that leads!

The more life one has, the more joy. This is true even on just a natural level. Consider the joy one has with physical well being, when one feels so full of life that at times it almost hurts. Consider also the joy one has with mental activity, mental achievements, the scholar who has just completed his thesis, the artist who has just completed his painting, the one who is thrilled with his job. All these examples are of life in its ultimate form here on earth. And of course when one falls in love, then two lives are connected and with more life, more joy.

Now add to all this one's faith. God created the human race not to be just another of his creations but to be the crown of all creation here on earth. God did all of this out of love. There was no other reason. He wanted ultimately to share with humans his eternal life, to live with him forever. But before this was to happen, he wanted man to be a part of his creation, giving Adam and Eve and all their future posterity an opportunity to put their mark on his world, our planet. He gave them gifts to make this all the more enjoyable, the gift of immortality (they would never die) the gift of integrity (they had full control of all their passions), and the gift of his personal friendship. They were to have life to the full here on earth. But they deliberately disobeyed Him and because of this, lost these three gifts. Now life on earth would

be ever so much more difficult, but yet this life would go on. The ultimate plan of God was still in place. But God who created out of love would not and could not hold back his love. From the very beginning he determined that one day he would undo the harm of Adam and Eve's first sin. And so some thousands of years later, he sent his only son to become a man, to teach all men how to live, and to ultimately undo the harm of their sin by giving his life as a ransom for everyone. What happened is history. His son, Jesus Christ gave his life so that we could all live. In doing this he also gave a glimpse of what was awaiting everyone, a final resurrection when all would rise from the dead to be perfect human beings living with him in his eternal kingdom forever.

What Christ gave to his people beyond his death and resurrection, was a firm foundation for life with joy. He gave the human race a real hope that what awaited everyone was everlasting life. Life on earth would still be wrought with problems, natural problems, many due to the loss of the original gifts of God. But now through faith one can realize that all has not been lost, that the ultimate goal of God can be realized by everyone. To make it all a bit easier, he established his church and gave it the means for everyone to not only have a full life but more importantly to share in the life of Christ through his Church and his living legacy of the Mass and the Sacraments.

Putting all this together today twenty centuries after Christ is what Lent is all about. It is not just forty days of being miserable doing penance or giving up something one likes. Rather it is a time to prepare for the celebration of the greatest feast in the Church, the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is also the greatest feast of the love of God for all his people, past, present and future. In a word it is a greatest feast of life, an assurance that each and every one of us will one day follow Christ in rising from the dead. We were all created to be human beings with a body and a soul and that is what we are destined to be for all eternity. We will not be some immaterial beings like angels. Exactly what we will all look like and be like is beyond our imagination and our greatest expectations.

Out of all this must come a great joy, a joy which must permeate our entire lives and hopefully radiate out to others. All the efforts one makes during the time of Lent are not lost; they help one to take control of their life, help one to make better and longer lasting decisions. They help one to enjoy life more and thus experience a longer lasting joy. Out of this comes an invisible aura which others notice but cannot explain. One's actions show a joy much more than one's words. Without realizing it, one's joy allows God to work through one to touch others and bring them to come to know what it is in you that so intrigues them. In a word, they begin to see God in action in our world. Thus the faith begins to grow in others, not only enriching them but also enriching you, the one who lives a life of joy in the Lord.

Use the remaining weeks of Lent to come to know the Lord more and more in an intimate way. Let his love into your life and begin to experience something of the divine life of God. All this may sound a bit strange, but once one is truly open to God, then it all begins to make perfect sense. Will one be perfect after this? Hardly! Everyone still has a fallen human nature which is constantly at odds with the life God offers them. No one wants to be out of step with their contemporaries, but the fact is that with God at one's side, with a joy that cannot be hidden, one becomes a channel for God to help make one's world a far better place. Enjoy life; let God in; experience a foretaste of our destiny.

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