

Easter III

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“Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.

I read an article in *The Economist* this week that reported on a recent Gallup Poll ranking countries by happiness. For the first time since this particular survey began, the United States has dropped out of the top twenty “happiest” countries. The poll was based on self-reported happiness; that is, whether an individual subjectively feels happy with his life. What was most striking is that Americans over the age of 60 ranked tenth overall for happiness, whilst Americans under the age of 30 ranked 62nd. This is apparently a marked decline from only a decade ago, when both age groups reported similar levels of happiness.

Unfortunately, this trend is consistent with data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which have shown an increase in mental health problems and depression every year since 2011. According to the latest CDC study, forty-two percent of high school students experience persistent and debilitating feelings of

sadness, hopelessness, loneliness, and meaninglessness. Forty-two percent! Fully one quarter of youth have seriously contemplated suicide, which has now become the second-leading cause of death amongst adolescents aged 15 to 19.

Though possible explanations for this mental health crisis abound—such as overuse of technology, social media, drug abuse, and the COVID lockdowns—what is rarely reported is another trend that, I think, reveals a deeper and more profound societal malaise that is directly responsible for our collective unhappiness.

According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2022, more than forty percent of Americans under the age of 34 identify themselves as “religiously unaffiliated”, compared with fewer than 15% of Americans over 60. Do these numbers sound familiar? Though it is an axiom of logic that correlation does not equal causation, we know that there are spiritual powers and truths behind everything in the material world. Astonishingly, a Columbia University clinical psychologist and brain researcher called Lisa Miller, who has done extensive work on adolescent mental health, has concluded that the alarming rise in rates of depression, substance abuse, and addictive behaviours is the result of “the absence of support for children’s spiritual growth,” which has led to a crisis of meaning and identity.

This should not surprise us. If Catholic Christianity is an accurate description of reality—of the purpose of life, of our true identity in Christ, and of the end to which all things are inevitably

progressing—then it only stands to reason that the decline of Catholic faith will result in unreality, confusion, and meaninglessness.

So what is the purpose of life? Perhaps the most succinct answer is found in The Baltimore Catechism: “God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be joyful with Him forever in the next.” That little word *joyful*, so elusive to us in this shallow age, is precisely the solution to our crisis of meaning.

Our modern society has succeeded in multiplying our opportunities for pleasure, but it has great difficulty producing *joy*. Instead, we have been collectively deceived into the dangerous belief that *happiness* is what really matters. Our very government enshrined the “pursuit of happiness” as a God-given right, and our culture has been obsessed with that fleeting ideal ever since. This pressure to be happy is everywhere. Scientists, politicians, therapists, and media personalities extol the value of happiness: “Live your truth.” “Do what feels good.” “My body, my choice.” These are the mantras of a secular religion that divinizes the self and considers emotional satisfaction to be the fundamental meaning of life. The pursuit of this idol has become so extreme, that we as a society now tolerate moral evils that would have made our pagan forebears proud: surgical mutilation of children, no-fault divorce, rampant substance abuse, pornography, abortion.

And it's not only the secular world that has embraced the happiness cult. Some of the largest religious organizations in this country are the so-called "megachurches," almost all of which preach a false gospel that would have people believe financial blessing, physical well-being, and emotional gratification are God's highest will for their lives. In other words, if you're poor, sick, or sad, it's because you don't have enough faith. This is deception of the highest order, and yet tens of thousands go to these establishments week after week in a never-ending pursuit of happiness. Still others, embracing a theology of postmodernism, preach a desacralized gospel of social justice, where happiness will be attained if only all structures of authority and tradition are destroyed to make way for the cardinal virtues of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. In every case, however, it is a supreme and undeniable irony that the harder we grasp after happiness, the more unhappy and depressed we seem to become. What humanity needs is not a momentary happiness borne out of emotional exhilaration, but a deep and lasting *joy* of knowing the authentic truth of who we are, why we were made, and where we are going.

In today's Gospel, Our Lord reveals to his disciples for the first time his impending ascent to the Father. You will note that today marks twenty days since the Resurrection, exactly halfway through the forty days of Eastertide prior to Christ's ascension. The apostles—as is so often the case with them *and* with us—are

slow to understand what Our Lord is telling them. They are confused and sad that Christ has said he must go to the Father. This is understandable; after all, barely three weeks have passed since the trauma of the Crucifixion, and the idea of losing Christ again is too much to bear. “Ye shall be sorrowful,” Our Lord says by way of empathy, “but your sorrow shall be turned into joy”. Just as when a pregnant woman—overtaken by grief at the painful trial of childbirth she must endure—is nevertheless overjoyed when she holds her newborn; soon, too, the apostles will rejoice with a joy that nobody can take from them.

This joy, however, is not simply a whimsical happiness, but is an absolute, permanent, unshakeable conviction that the Creator of all things in his infinite mercy, and without any merit of our own, has become one of us. In his Passion he has destroyed the work of the devil, sanctified suffering, forgiven our sins, and liberated us from our prison of mortality; in his Resurrection he has killed death, bestowed unending life on humanity, and given us the promise of future glory. In his Ascension, he is drawing all men to himself, liberating creation from bondage, triumphing over evil, subjecting all temporal and eternal powers to his authority, and filling the whole creation with his own divine life. At his Second Advent, he will restore all things to perfection, he will cast death and hell into the fire of love that flows from his throne, and he will dwell forever in complete harmony with all mankind.

This joy is the knowledge that in Christ, we will obtain victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil; that in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, Our Lord has given us his true and living Flesh and Blood—his very soul and divinity—as our sustenance.

This joy knows without doubt that “neither tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor peril, nor sword” can separate us from the love which Christ bears towards us. The Christian’s rejoicing is that his Saviour, his God, who for his sake became man, does really and truly love him; that wherever he goes, his Saviour accompanies him, shields him from temptation, supports him lest he fall; “when thou passest through the water, he shall be with thee,” “in the valley of the shadow of death he shall be thy shepherd; his rod and his staff shall comfort thee.”

This joy is the confession that God is good to all; that his mercy, which endures forever, is over all his works; that as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

If Christ is our Defense, what can we fear? If Christ is our Possession, what can we lose? If Christ is our Peace, what can trouble us? If Christ is our Life; what can destroy us? How should death, or life, or angels, or principalities, or powers, or things present, or things to come, or height, or depth, or any other creature, separate us from the love of God in Christ our Lord? This is true joy, because this is the Gospel.

Nevertheless, this joy comes at a cost. Our Lord endured the cross, despising its shame, for the sake of the joy that was set before him. The message of Christianity is simple, but entirely contrary to the popular sentiments of our culture: “take up your cross, and follow me”; “in this world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world”. No servant is greater than his Master, and we too must pass through death before we can achieve resurrection. We cannot escape the crucifixion of our egos, our vices, our disordered desires. In fact, Our Lord made it clear that these must be annihilated if we are to be re-formed into people of wholeness and holiness. Authentic Christian joy is not found *in place* of suffering, but *through* suffering—it is the transformation of our circumstances, the death of self, and the gratuitous love of others.

To be joyful, as our Introit this morning commanded us, is a choice. We choose to open our hearts and minds to the Presence of God. We choose to trust with unshakeable faith that Christ is risen, never to die again. St. Peter exhorts us not to think it strange when we endure some terrible suffering, but rather to “rejoice, inasmuch as [we] are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, [we] may be glad also with exceeding joy”. We will have pain and failure. Yet our joy is not tied to the changes and chances of this life, but to our hope in Christ. Like the woman in childbirth, we rejoice, for our sorrow will endure only a little while.

If we want to share this joy with the world, then we must begin by living as though we really believe that Christ is risen. We must rid ourselves of false gospels and self-centered idols. We must pray for the grace to be as the martyrs: men and women who stared down the lion's gory mane because their joy in Christ was of greater value than happiness in this world. We will not grow the Church simply by beautiful liturgies, clever (if sometimes long) preaching, or great social gatherings—as important as these things are. No, we must live the Gospel, which is nothing other than the proclamation that because the incarnate Son of God was crucified and is risen, no one's life story will be finally and irrevocably tragic. God is actually good, Christ unconditionally loves all men; and even though we may not now see him, “yet believing, we rejoice with joy unspeakable: for we are receiving the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls.”

O come, let us venerate Christ's holy Resurrection. For behold, through the Cross joy hath come into all the world.

Amen.