



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!" (Phil 4:4)

"I have told you this, so that my own joy may be in you, and your joy be complete." (Jn 15:11)

"Sing joyfully to God, all the earth" (Ps 99: 1; 97:4 etc.)

Monastic Voices

"There is a joy, a peace in us that must never be shaken, by no circumstance, because it lives in that part of us where God reigns and dwells. God is peace, joy, and happiness. Our troubles should never penetrate to that region we have reserved for him. We must always find rest, calm, and happiness, even when everything else is agitated, submerged, unsettled. We have only one task on this earth: to overcome ourselves, to become masters of ourselves, so that our whole soul, in harmony like a first-class piano, can play music worthy of the One who has made us. Sadness that produces discouragement and melancholy is a result of self-love, combined with the physical state we are in at the time. Nothing else. So shake it off, and make an effort to be cheerful. Cheerfulness takes courage; but it is for God that we must overcome ourselves in this way."

"Be Alleluia from head to toe."

(Dom Prosper Gueranger, 1805-1875, first Abbot of Solesmes)

"Goodness, and a fully-developed soul, manifest themselves by joy. The longer I live, and the older I grow, the more clearly I see that joy is the most perfect expression of a soul consecrated to God. The closeness of God is manifested in this blossoming of the soul, this agreeable and simple manner. Do you want to praise God perfectly, and to give him pleasing homage? Be resolutely joyful in the midst of everything. The One to whom you are united is the source of all beatitude; you cannot touch him, enter into contact with him, without peace, calm, serenity and joy flooding your soul. The secret of joy, then, of security in the supernatural life, is to centre one's attention upon God rather than on oneself.

So repulse any element of sadness that might insinuate itself into you. We are so rich, so saturated with God, that all our misery can only come from lack of awareness. We possess everything, and it is real ingratitude to behave as if we had not the slightest suspicion of the fact."

(Abbess Cecile Bruyere, 1845-1909, first Abbess of Sainte-Cecile de Solesmes)

"The normal, persevering attitude of a baptized person is the high noon of joy. Those who belong to the Lord are given over to joy. Since we are with the Lord, and he is with us, how do you expect our life not to be a life of joy, of exultation? For us, to be happy is an act of virtue. Is it not a remarkable religion, in which joy is a

precept, in which the command is to be happy, in which cheerfulness is a duty? Joy is also an act of adoration, because it bears witness to the fact that God, who belongs to us, is everything to us. I believe that the most complete, the most profound, and the most filial homage that we can pay to God in the course of our supernatural life is quite simply to be happy in his presence, in a joyfulness that nothing can alter, that nothing can disconcert. The tenor of our whole life should show God that there can be no sadness where he is.

Sadness, as you can see, has something blasphemous about it. Whenever anything troubles us, wounds us, turns us away from God, we should say, 'It's nothing.' We should not affirm anything but God. To deny thus the things that are in any way hostile to him is to deny and renounce ourselves. And if you would like to make a little attempt at this spirituality of calm and perfect serenity, you will soon discover how effective it is.

This peace of God is not only the peace that comes from God, it is the peace that is God. One could translate 'Pax' as 'Deus' - 'for he is our peace' (Eph 2:14)."

(Dom Paul Delatte, 1848-1937, third Abbot of Solesmes)

(Quotations from The Spirit of Solesmes, ed. Sr. Mary David Totah O.S.B.)

Dear Oblates and friends

I thought I should write something about joy; partly because the season of joy will be with us again soon; but also because there has been so much of it about here lately. It has been here simply one thing after another - God blessing our community beyond all measure. Why, He alone knows. The Jubilee day itself of course was a wonderful occasion - a day of superabundant joy. But there have been so many other occasions... Fr. Martin's Solemn Profession on 15 August stands out: perhaps especially because it was the consummation for him of so many years' patient waiting. Then there was Fr. Prior's Silver Jubilee, and the monastic initiation of James Downs, who is now a novice with the name Br. Paschal. Having all our brethren from overseas together again was a great blessing. Fr. Ambrose, incidentally, looking fine, and in good spirits. We have had more "monthers", and Joseph Bagley is back as a proper postulant. The inaugural concert for the new organ was an unforgettable experience; and the Church is now further enhanced with a beautiful new triple light stained glass window. We had a good community retreat, and an encouraging canonical Visitation. I myself have again been allowed 8 days' private retreat, "alone with God". For me, a source of much grace, peace, consolation: for all of which I'm most grateful.

When God sends us graces like this, it would be the height of bad manners not to accept them gladly as gifts to be enjoyed. But Christian joy is not dependent on these things. Its roots go deeper. The joy that comes from faith, from God, is compatible with suffering. We should say more: often suffering can be a means of bringing us to true joy, since it draws us closer to Christ.

This mystery of invincible joy is clearly revealed on Calvary. We know what was in the mind and heart of Jesus, as he went to his passion. It is set forth for us, in all its sublime beauty, in St. John's Gospel, chapters 13-17. The peace, love and joy Jesus speaks about there certainly did not cancel out his agony. But the pain and even the spiritual desolation of Calvary could not interrupt his joy. Why? Because it came from his knowledge of the Father, and of his own obedience to the Father's will. And he knew what would be the result of the cross. Absolute victory; Life out of death; Satan overthrown; sin undone; Heaven thrown open; the Holy Spirit poured out; the Father glorified; mankind redeemed; definitive joy brought into the world. What, though, of his Mother, the Woman of sorrows, who had to stand and watch her Son die? No other sorrow in all human history could equal the sorrow she knew then. Yet St. Pius X taught that, even there, there must have been some part in her that did not cease to rejoice. Mary, full of grace, the cause of our joy, could not have failed in faith and hope, even at the foot of the cross.

St. Paul understood this perfectly. He described himself once as "in pain, but always full of joy" (2 Cor 6:10). So when he commanded the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord "always", he knew what he was talking about, and meant what he said. Paul was not preaching flight from reality, or merely stoic resignation in bearing hardships. Rather, he understood that to partake of the sufferings of Christ, is to share also in his resurrection (cf. Phil 3:10; 2 Cor 12:9-10; Gal 2:20; Rm 8:18 etc).

For his part, St. Benedict does all he can to banish sadness from the monastery (HR 31:19; 35:3; 27:3 etc.). He insists that obedience be offered cheerfully (5:16). But it is precisely in the chapter on lent, and in the 4th step of humility, that he speaks explicitly about joy. It is when the brethren are hungry and tired, silent and serious that he particularly expects them to know the joy of the Holy Spirit, (49:6), looking forward to holy Easter with "the joy of spiritual desire" (49:7). In the 4th step of humility, he foresees that life can sometimes bring us real difficulties and injustices. These can seem to us like death, fire, enslavement, blows, stripping, coercion; an experience of false brethren and persecution. The monk, the Christian, the follower of Christ, says St. Benedict, will remain joyful, certain of the hope of divine reward, for "in all this we are more than conquerors, because of him who loved us" (7:39). Meanwhile, those whose lives are ordinary and routine can still share in Christ's passion simply through patience (Prol 50).

I think it is very important that we Christians today live our faith with joy. Our secularised world will not accept a witness of words alone. The new evangelisation will not be effective without people showing that Christ really has transformed their lives. True Christian joy is exceedingly attractive. All the Saints had it. It is something that cannot be given by the consumer society. It cannot be manufactured, or bought, or sold. It is incompatible with serious sin. As one of the fruits of the Spirit, it is inseparable from patience, kindness, and goodness; from trustfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22).

Someone recently asked me what I thought about their constant prayer to be given the strength to bear their cross. I said I thought the prayer wasn't big enough. They should pray to be given the strength to bear their cross with joy. Or even just pray for joy. Or for the Holy Spirit, best of all.

We should ask the Holy Spirit to give us joy. And we should nurture it in ourselves. Not, certainly, through forced or artificial joviality (see HR 7:59), but through assiduous prayer; through meditation on holy scripture; through frequent communion and the sacrament of reconciliation; through the exercise of fraternal charity and willing service of others. And joy being highly infectious, we can catch it by studying the lives of the Saints. Let me then leave you, then, with the well-known story from the Fioretti, of the journey of St. Francis of Assisi to St. Mary of the Angels.

Saint Francis on Perfect Joy

One day in winter, as St. Francis was going with Brother Leo from Perugia to St. Mary of the Angels, and was suffering greatly from the cold, he called to Brother Leo, who was walking on before him, and said to him: "Brother Leo, if it were to please God that the Friars Minor should give, in all lands, a great example of holiness and edification, write down, and note carefully, that this would not be perfect joy." A little further on, St. Francis called to him a second time: "O Brother Leo, if the Friars Minor were to make the lame to walk, if they should make straight the crooked, chase away demons, give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and if they should even raise the dead to life, write that this would not be perfect joy." Shortly after, he cried out again: "O Brother Leo, if the Friars Minor were versed in all science; if they could explain all scriptures; if they could speak with the tongues of angels; if they could explain the course of the stars; if they knew the virtues of all plants - write that this would not be perfect joy." After proceeding a few steps further, he cried out again with a loud voice: "O Brother Leo, thou little lamb of God! if the Friars Minor had the gift of preaching so as to convert all infidels to the faith of Christ, write that this would not be perfect joy."

Now when this manner of discourse had lasted the space of two miles, Brother Leo wondered much within himself; and questioning the Saint, he said: "Father, I pray thee, teach me wherein is perfect joy."

St. Francis answered: "If, when we arrive at St. Mary of the Angels, all drenched with rain and trembling with cold, all covered with mud and exhausted from hunger; if, when we knock at the convent gate, the porter should come angrily and ask us who we are; if, after we have told him, 'We are two of the brethren,' he should answer angrily, 'What ye say is not the truth; ye are but two imposters going about to deceive the world, and take away the alms of the poor; begone, I say'; if then he refuse to open to us, and leave us outside, exposed to the snow and rain, suffering from cold and hunger till nightfall - then, if we accept such injustice and such contempt with patience, without murmuring, believing with humility and charity that the porter really knows us, and that it is God who maketh him to speak thus against us, write down, O Brother Leo, that this is perfect joy. And if we knock again, and the porter come out in anger to drive us away with oaths and blows, as if we were vile imposters, saying, 'Begone, miserable robbers! go to the hospital, for here you shall neither eat nor sleep!' - and if we accept all this with patience, with joy, and with charity, O Brother Leo, write that this indeed is perfect

joy. And if, urged by cold and hunger, we knock again, calling to the porter and entreating him with many tears to open to us and give us shelter, for the love of God, and if he come out more angry than before, exclaiming, 'These are but importunate rascals, I will deal with them as they deserve'; and taking a knotted stick, he seize us by the hood, throwing us on the ground, rolling us in the snow, and shall beat and wound us with the knots in the stick - if we bear all these injuries with patience, and joy, thinking of the sufferings of our Blessed Lord, which we would share out of love for him, write, O Brother Leo, that here, finally, is perfect joy.

And now brother, listen to the conclusion. Above all the graces and all the gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ grants to his friends, is the grace of overcoming oneself, and accepting willingly, out of love for Christ, all suffering, injury, discomfort, and contempt; for in all other gifts of God we cannot glory, seeing they proceed not from ourselves but from God, according to the words of the Apostle, 'What hast thou that thou hast not received from God? and if thou hast received it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?' (1 Cor 4:7). But in the cross of tribulation and affliction we may glory, because, as the Apostle says, 'I will not glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.' (Gal 6:14) Amen."