

7. Finding joy again

Often one looks at joy as one looks at children, that is, as if it were a feeling that is wonderful, pleasant, loved by everyone, but that soon or later will fade away, and so one considers it as if it were not truly essential to the maturity of our lives, to the proper conduct of our task and duty. At the most we think of it with nostalgia, but as if resigning ourselves to not finding it again, like the innocence of our childhood. And this is true in living the Christian life also, in living a vocation in the Church and the mission, the ministry, to which we have been called.

Every vocation and mission, especially those that imply a pastoral or educative responsibility, for example the mission of parents, must always, sooner or later, take account of the reality of opposition, of adversity, of hostility, at any rate of the effort it will take to bring to completion with the others the task that has been entrusted, the mission that has been asked of us. The effort of being, as St. Paul writes, “coworkers for each other’s joy” (cf. 2 Cor 1:24).

When we experience opposition, discord, hostility, obviously and inevitably we become sad, the task burdens us, we lose serenity, we lose joy. In my life I have often found myself in this situation. Periods in which sadness seems to rise up like a tide, in which you get up in the morning thinking more about reasons for sadness and disappointment than for hope. What saved me was not so much the solution to the problems, to the adversities, or to my limitations in living out the mission, all things that will never stop tormenting us. What saved me has always been the grace of finding joy again, or, if you like, of rediscovering joy as a grace, as a surprise, and of rediscovering in it the source of my life, my vocation, my mission.

Often this rediscovery of joy has really been a surprise, and hence the gift of God’s mercy who as it were rediscovered me, a lost sheep and shepherd, sharing His joy with me, the joy of his love that celebrates when it saves and brings back home the one who was lost or at least disoriented. In time, however, the experience of this surprise became an awareness that I must also seek out this joy, rediscover it, ask for it, cultivate it, precisely to avoid remaining always like a twig of straw overwhelmed by sadness, the sadness bent back on itself, tinged with pessimism, which is like a whirlpool in the river that, instead of letting you continue running toward the sea, drags you toward the miry depth where you get drowned.

I was saying that we often consider joy like our innocent childhood, that is, with resigned nostalgia. But in the light of the Gospel we know that this nostalgic consideration is a pagan, not an evangelized, position. Why? Because Christ announced it to us: “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me’” (Mt 18:1–5).

If Jesus asks us to turn and become like children, it means that this is possible, that childhood is not a past to be sadly missed, but the possible horizon of our conversion, of our human and Christian maturation, of the maturity of our vocation and mission. Deep down, Jesus shifts our childhood from the past to the future, from behind us to the horizon toward which we are going.

The same is true for joy, or rather, this is true *at the same time* for joy, because one associates with children I would say a natural capacity for joy, for expressing joy of heart, as a relationship with people and life. Jesus does not, however, offer all this as a return to the past, but as the open horizon of a path of conversion, as something that we can and must become: “unless you turn and become like children.”

Basically, Jesus proposes childhood to us as a new beginning from which we should always start over. The whole Church, too, does not grow except by returning constantly and in every age to its permanent beginning, to its birth and childhood, which is Pentecost, the event in which the Spirit shares with everyone the beginning of the Annunciation to Mary and her “Behold!”, the beginning of the incarnation of the Word, the beginning of the call of Peter and of all the apostles, the beginning of every encounter with Jesus in the Gospel, the beginning of the proclamation of the Gospel, the beginning of the Last Supper, of the Passion and Death of the Redeemer, above all the absolute beginning of the Resurrection.

And all this has a psychological and spiritual resonance, as well as a physical resonance, in us: joy, the mystery of joy, the grace of joy. But we must understand what it means, and let ourselves be taught about it by the Word of God and the experience of the saints.

At the same time, however, while I was preparing these meditations on joy, I could not disengage myself from the great pain that torments the whole world: wars, injustices, poverty and hunger, the lack of meaning for life. I could not even disengage from the many sick or tormented people who have asked me for prayer and fellowship.

I told myself: I cannot meditate on and speak about joy if in this joy there is not a central place for the suffering of humanity. An indispensable condition for true joy is that you not leave out any part of human suffering, otherwise it would be a false and hypocritical joy. How can my joy live along with the suffering of humanity, with the war in Ukraine, and all the other wars about which often only the Pope speaks, or with the devastating natural disasters?

Here we touch upon an essential aspect that we should explore more deeply: the indissoluble link between true joy and love. A joy that leaves out pain is an egotistical joy, bent in on itself, that does not shine forth. Christian joy, the joy of Christ, the joy that He promises us, is a joy that is inseparable from charity.