

## 17. Surprised by joy

What I have said, that in every case joy must embrace also all the motives and situations of pain and sorrow, shows us something that we cannot understand without experiencing it: that true joy, the joy of Christ, is truly a surprise.

What is a surprise? It is a reality that we did not expect, that we could not imagine, that we cannot produce ourselves.

The response to the dilemma of pain, of evil, of death, does not come from us, cannot come from us. It must come from a surprising experience, from the experience of a reality that is granted to us. We collaborate toward the joy of others only if we experience the occurrence of something impossible about which we can only bear witness. But if we must be collaborators toward the joy of others, for others, in one way or another, we must first of all have this experience ourselves.

The experience of being surprised is fundamental to the discovering of Christian joy, because it is the experience of a joy that is not produced by us, that is not the result of a method, of a training, or of I don't know what else. It is joy as an occurrence, as the impact upon us of a surprising event. Of course, when you are surprised by joy, you realize that your heart was awaiting and seeking this experience, that it was made for this. But the surprise is the experience of a leap that reveals to us, makes us touch, grants us, an "increase of reality," whether interior or exterior, that we could not foresee. Etymologically, "to surprise" suggests a being taken from above, that can be understood as a being grasped, taken, by something that is superior to us, that is greater than we are.

Perhaps the most obvious and explicit such leap is the sudden bounce of joy that St. John the Baptist makes in the womb of Elizabeth upon the arrival of Mary, already pregnant with Jesus:

"In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.' And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.'" (Lk 1:39-47)

Let's think of the expression of St. Paul, "Coworkers for your joy," in light of this episode. Mary, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, are all collaborators for the joy of each other, like a whirlpool of joy that catches each one and that each shares with the others. A type of *perichoresis*, a circumincession of joy. But this happens because at the center of this exchange there is a hidden treasure, the hidden treasure *par excellence*: the Word incarnate in the womb of Mary. And this happens because the presence of the Son introduces into the relationships among these people the gift of

the Holy Spirit. It is like the Most Holy Trinity, the Trinitarian circumincession, connected itself to the human relationships, in the communion among the human persons. And this is a surprise, and this surprise is joy. The joy and surprise of the treasure that is suddenly shared like a surprising gift.

In this scene it is Jesus who brings the joy, who brings the hidden treasure that lets itself be found, be met. But this treasure, this joy, would remain hidden and hence would surprise no one with infinite joy if there were no coworkers for the joy of the treasure. And the first, after Mary, is a six-month-old fetus that becomes like the switch that allows the current to flow, that makes way for the circulation of joy among, Jesus, himself, Elizabeth, Mary, etc., without limit, because that current has also reached us and continues and will continue to reach humanity up to the end of the world.

What makes joy spring up in John is the presence of Christ, the mysterious recognition of this presence. What makes this possible? What gives rise, between an embryo and a fetus, to a meeting full of joy, of joy for the other, for a presence that is not seen, that is not heard, that is not touched? Thirty-three years later, The Risen One will tell Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed!" (Jn 20:29). But why can one believe without seeing? What is the basis of faith and the joy of believing more profoundly than sight, hearing, and touch?

When on the evening of Easter Jesus appears to the Apostles, who had been incredulous up to then, the Gospel of John says that "the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord" (Jn 20:20). They believe and rejoice at the same time. So also in other scenes when the Risen One appears. But it is like the joy comes before the faith. To the extent that in the Gospel of Luke there is a Resurrection-appearance scene in which it is said that the disciples, though in front of Jesus who shows them the wounds on his risen Body, "still disbelieved for joy and were marveling" (Lk 24:41).

Joy comes before faith, but this also means that faith is greater than joy, that is, that joy, marvel, being surprised by joy, is not an experience that is an end in itself, but a sign, a prophecy, an indication that makes us attentive to the real presence of the Risen One in our midst.

The joy is not in the joy, but in the incredible treasure that gives rise to it. But the joy makes sense, it is the sense that recognizes the treasure, if faith chooses it or accepts it. Faith is the possessing of the treasure, a possession that recognizes its absolute value, and hence grasps it to itself, in the own life.

But it is precisely then, at the moment when joy for Christ leads to faith in Christ, that the heart becomes capable of remaining attached to the treasure even beyond the joy, in a love that embraces all, including pain and death. Because faith recognizes that the presence of the risen Jesus is what gives meaning, truth, and beauty to all of life. And this is a judgment of faith, which is not just theoretical, but is an experience. There, too, where joy cannot be felt, because pain is more present to sense, faith perceives a fullness that is greater than joy: to live in Christ, and that nothing separate us from Him, from his love.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:35–39)

Recently, when a friend let me know that unfortunately the first round of chemotherapy for his tumor had not worked, I repeated this essential question that St. Paul helps us put before everyone: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” And I suggested that he add his illness to the open list of sufferings that the Apostle describes: “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?”

This friend thanked me, because this thought sort of inserted itself between him and his illness, revealing that something greater than every evil defines our life, gives it meaning, even if we lose everything, even if we lose our life. As Psalm 63 prays: “Because your steadfast love [your grace, your mercy, your *hesed*] is better than life, my lips will praise you” (Ps 63:3).

Psalm 63, like so many psalms, places in God’s presence all the misery that the psalmist feels in all his humanity: “My soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (v. 1), and at the end of the psalm you see it is not only an interior trial, but the condition of a man threatened by “those who seek to destroy my life” (v. 9) and by “liars” (v. 11).

Joy for him – what makes him sing praise to God (v. 3), and makes him say, “My mouth will praise you with joyful lips” (v. 5) and, “In the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy” (v. 7) – joy for him, and for all of us, is entirely in the discovery of being loved by the Lord with a love that is greater than life.