

SEVENTH CATECHESIS

THE CULTURE OF JOY

“WHEN THEY SAW HIM, THEY WERE ASTONISHED” (Lk 2:48)

Mary, Virgin and Mother, you who, moved by the Holy Spirit,
welcomed the word of life in the depths of your humble faith:
as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One,
help us to say our own “yes” to the urgent call, as pressing as ever,
to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

Filled with Christ’s presence, you brought joy to John the Baptist,
making him exult in the womb of his mother.

Brimming over with joy, you sang of the great things done by God.
Standing at the foot of the cross with unyielding faith,
you received the joyful comfort of the resurrection,
and joined the disciples in awaiting the Spirit
so that the evangelizing Church might be born.

Obtain for us now a new ardor born of the resurrection,
that we may bring to all the Gospel of life
which triumphs over death.

Give us a holy courage to seek new paths,
that the gift of unfading beauty
may reach every man and woman.

Virgin of listening and contemplation,
Mother of love, Bride of the eternal wedding feast,
pray for the Church, whose pure icon you are,
that she may never be closed in on herself
or lose her passion for establishing God’s kingdom.

Star of the new evangelization,
help us to bear radiant witness to communion,
service, ardent and generous faith,
justice and love of the poor,
that the joy of the Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth,
illuminating even the fringes of our world.

Mother of the living Gospel, wellspring of happiness for God’s little ones, pray for us.
Amen. Alleluia!

(Pope Francis, Evangelium Gaudium, 24 November 2013)

Joy is often considered the crowning of one’s desires, of personal projects, and of what is dearest to one’s heart—as if people really knew what makes human life happy. Today’s culture, with the power of the mass media, can strongly inculcate into people’s minds and hearts a model of joy that seems valid for every human being in

every country, tradition, and culture. One example of this is the mobile phone: today, almost everyone has their own, and all those who do not have one yet want to get one as soon as possible. In other words, in a rather subtle but very effective way, a model of man is being proposed: if a person wants to be happy and fully integrated into social relations with others, he/she cannot do without this technological device. Yet, is it really true that man knows with certainty what makes him truly happy? Is it possible that, in order to be happy, one must struggle and fight to realize a model of life that, ultimately, only a few in the world can have? Once again, the Gospel icon chosen as a reference for these catecheses offers a light to direct our path towards true joy. The Evangelist Luke notes that the first emotional reaction of Mary and Joseph, when they find Jesus sitting in the temple and discussing with the teachers, is amazement and not anguish, anger, or any other negative feeling, which would also have been justifiable because of the fear they experienced at having lost him. The child that Mary carried in her womb for nine months and that Joseph saved from the hands of King Herod by taking him to Egypt now does something that, for them, is unexpected and surprising. Deep wonder arises in their hearts with a joy that is not easy to describe—like when we receive a gift that goes far beyond our expectations and desires. Joy, real joy, which is always unexpected and surprising, enlarges the heart towards infinite horizons. On the contrary, joy that is desired and sought after, once it has been reached, closes the human heart within the limits of its desires and, then, spurs it on towards other unsatisfied aspirations. A person truly rejoices not when his desires have been fulfilled but when receiving happiness never dreamed of. It is no coincidence that the first word of the archangel Gabriel's greeting to Mary at the Annunciation, which has long been translated by "*Ave*" or "*Salve*," is in fact "*Rejoice*." He announces something unimaginable to this young betrothed woman of Nazareth, intent on realizing her dream of love with Joseph. The event radically changes her plans, yet the angel immediately tells her that what he is announcing to her is a source of great joy for her. True joy always upsets our plans and projects us beyond our narrow human aspirations. This is one of the fundamental reasons why the Christian message is often considered with great suspicion, as if it were an enemy of human happiness. *"This conviction on the part of the Church has often been rejected as opposed to human happiness. Benedict XVI summed up this charge with great clarity: 'Doesn't the Church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, turn to bitterness the most precious thing in life? Doesn't she blow the whistle just when the*

joy which is the Creator's gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?' He responded that, although there have been exaggerations and deviant forms of asceticism in Christianity, the Church's official teaching, in fidelity to the Scriptures, did not reject 'eros as such, but rather declared war on a warped and destructive form of it, because this counterfeit divinization of eros... actually strips it of divine dignity and dehumanizes it'" (AL 147). God is certainly not an enemy of human joy; on the contrary, He desires even more than the human creature to give man an overabundance of joy that touches every aspect of humanity, including the dimension often misleadingly considered true joy: the erotic dimension. The real enemy of sexual pleasure, contrary to what is commonly thought, is not God, the Gospel, or the Church. It is the man himself who, with his weakness caused by original sin, dehumanizes the beautiful and wonderful gift bestowed on him by the Creator. To set out towards true joy, one must also start from one's own body and the language inscribed in it. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis gives to all very concrete and prophetic indications: "*Training in the areas of emotion and instinct is necessary, and at times this requires setting limits. Excess, lack of control or obsession with a single form of pleasure can end up weakening and tainting that very pleasure and damaging family life. A person can certainly channel his passions in a beautiful and healthy way, increasingly pointing them towards altruism and an integrated self-fulfillment that can only enrich interpersonal relationships in the heart of the family. This does not mean renouncing moments of intense enjoyment, but rather integrating them with other moments of generous commitment, patient hope, inevitable weariness and struggle to achieve an ideal. Family life is all this, and it deserves to be lived to the fullest*" (AL 148). The Church's primary task is, then, to announce the *Evangelium Gaudium*—this is the title of the Pope's first Apostolic Exhortation—, because only the Gospel reveals true joy and educates man's heart to joy itself. "*God loves the enjoyment felt by human beings: he created us and 'richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy' (1 Tim 6:17). Let us be glad when with great love he tells us: 'My son, treat yourself well... Do not deprive yourself of a happy day' (Sir 14:11–14). Married couples likewise respond to God's will when they take up the biblical injunction: 'Be joyful in the day of prosperity' (Ec 7:14)*" (AL 149). If the Gospel reveals joy to man, the family is its original cradle. Since a marriage is born of the great desire of young spouses to find the fullness of joy, it fails mainly because this desire is not satisfied. Paradoxically, everyone seeks joy in marriage and all

convincingly promise joy in marriage; yet, many easily find themselves caught in the wreck of their marital covenant. Why do marriages increasingly fail? Furthermore, can it be said that a marriage has succeeded only because the spouses have been faithful to the end, although they have not lived their marital relationship with the joy of love? In other words, can spouses live the fullness of marriage simply by being faithful, or is there an essential, much deeper and more radical fidelity that gives taste and flavor to their married life? Today, the number of separations and divorces has exploded in comparison to a few decades ago, but it is not said that all the marriages of the past were successful because they lasted “till death do us part.” Perhaps the marriage pact was so spiritualized and moralized that an essential element at its origin was overshadowed. *“In marriage, the joy of love needs to be cultivated. When the search for pleasure becomes obsessive, it holds us in thrall and keeps us from experiencing other satisfactions. Joy, on the other hand, increases our pleasure and helps us find fulfilment in any number of things, even at those times of life when physical pleasure has ebbed. Saint Thomas Aquinas said that the word ‘joy’ refers to an expansion of the heart. Marital joy can be experienced even amid sorrow; it involves accepting that marriage is an inevitable mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures, but always on the path of friendship, which inspires married couples to care for one another: ‘they help and serve each other’”* (AL 126). How, then, can the joy of love be cherished and nurtured in the long and often monotonous flow of conjugal life? Is the simple commitment of the two spouses sufficient? Are their will and their effort enough to revive joy in their loving relationship? These are the mistakes of many couples that make their relationship degenerate and lead to dramatic and sometimes paradoxical conditions. It is not just a question of will but rather a sense of “spirituality of beauty” that allows the spouse to grasp and appreciate *“the ‘great worth’ of another person. Beauty – that ‘great worth’ which is other than physical or psychological appeal – enables us to appreciate the sacredness of a person, without feeling the need to possess it. In a consumerist society, the sense of beauty is impoverished and so joy fades. Everything is there to be purchased, possessed or consumed, including people. Tenderness, on the other hand, is a sign of a love free of selfish possessiveness. It makes us approach a person with immense respect and a certain dread of causing them harm or taking away their freedom. Loving another person involves the joy of contemplating and appreciating their innate*

beauty and sacredness, which is greater than my needs. This enables me to seek their good even when they cannot belong to me, or when they are no longer physically appealing but intrusive and annoying. For 'the love by which one person is pleasing to another depends on his or her giving something freely.' The aesthetic experience of love is expressed in that 'gaze' which contemplates other persons as ends in themselves, even if they are infirm, elderly or physically unattractive. A look of appreciation has enormous importance, and to begrudge it is usually hurtful. How many things do spouses and children sometimes do in order to be noticed! Much hurt and many problems result when we stop looking at one another. This lies behind the complaints and grievances we often hear in families: 'My husband does not look at me; he acts as if I were invisible.' 'Please look at me when I am talking to you!' 'My wife no longer looks at me, she only has eyes for our children.' 'In my own home nobody cares about me; they do not even see me; it is as if I did not exist.' Love opens our eyes and enables us to see, beyond all else, the great worth of a human being" (AL 127-128). Joy is not an accessory that depends on each family's situation. It is an essential part of the family's identity. When joy is missing, the family either goes into crisis or struggles on one day at a time. We need a true and deep spirituality because *"the joy of this contemplative love needs to be cultivated. Since we were made for love, we know that there is no greater joy than that of sharing good things: 'Give, take, and treat yourself well' (Sir 14:16). The most intense joys in life arise when we are able to elicit joy in others, as a foretaste of heaven. We can think of the lovely scene in the film Babette's Feast, when the generous cook receives a grateful hug and praise: 'Ah, how you will delight the angels!' It is a joy and a great consolation to bring delight to others, to see them enjoying themselves. This joy, the fruit of fraternal love, is not that of the vain and self-centered, but of lovers who delight in the good of those whom they love, who give freely to them and thus bear good fruit"* (AL 129). Only in this way can what according to human logic is impossible happen, that is to make *"joy also grow through pain and sorrow. In the words of Saint Augustine, 'the greater the danger in battle the greater is the joy of victory.'* After suffering and struggling together, spouses are able to experience that it was worth it, because they achieved some good, learned something as a couple, or came to appreciate what they have. Few human joys are as deep and thrilling as those experienced by two people who love one another and have achieved something as the result of a great, shared effort" (AL 130).

In the family

Let us reflect

1. People all get married because they feel great joy with regard to their heart's beloved and they want to realize with him or her the dream of their life, which is happiness. Why is all this, which so obvious, not always realized?
2. Is the joy of love in conjugal and family life an ideal or reality? Which ideal is unreal or which is true?

Let us live

1. The matter is not to find joy but to educate to true joy. In what sense should we educate ourselves to true joy and how can we do it?
2. Why can a marriage and family crisis become the source of a great joy of love?

In church

Let us reflect

1. As Pope Francis often says, the primary task of the Church is to proclaim the *Evangelii Gaudium*, because only the Gospel reveals and gives true joy to the human heart. Proclaiming this is not always evident. Why?
2. Today more than ever, the Church's pastoral action is filled with joy. What does this mean and how can this become a reality in our Christian communities?

Let us live

1. Today, many young people are very much afraid of getting married. How can the Church help them to rediscover the joy of consecrated love in the Sacrament of Marriage?
2. What could the Church do to help families live and experience the true joy of love?