

Catholic Joy?

Melanie Jean Juneau • April 24, AD2015

Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, not a special gift given to a select few; it is simply a by-product of living in God. However, when people think of a Catholic saint, the first image that comes to mind is a sad, pale, thin figure, often tortured and in pain, or looking as if he was wearing a hair shirt. Traditional Catholic art has reinforced this impression. Recently I was looking for images of smiling or laughing monks. Hundreds of images popped up featuring Buddhist monks laughing, but I had trouble finding a handful of photos or paintings of joyful Catholic monks and priests. This is a quandary since Sacred Scriptures exhorts the people of God to trust and embrace joy.

Nehemiah 8:10 Do not be grieved (sad, sorrowful), for the joy of the LORD is your strength.

Somehow the average Catholic does not associate joy with holiness but believes holiness is synonymous with misery. Yes, before someone becomes outraged, redemptive suffering is a powerful vocation. Yet Catholics are more focused on the Passion than on Pentecost while Pentecostals are more focused on, well, Pentecost. Although we are in a Liturgical season of joy, there are still more pins of the Crucified Christ than of the Resurrected Christ on Pinterest's Catholic sites. However, what most Catholics experience, as they identify with Christ's Passion, is far from redemptive because they are not completely one with Christ, nor are their difficulties lived out in a spirit of Divine Love.

The first time we became aware a Godly life was a joyful life was 26 years ago while my husband made a silent retreat at a Trappist monastery near Oka, Quebec. He was walking quietly down a hallway, trying to be quiet and unobtrusive when a tall, athletic-looking monk threw his head back and let loose a full-out belly laugh. It sparked joy in everyone who heard it. That's what holy laughter does; it ignites the joy of the Lord in others.

Another Trappist, Thomas Merton, was asked if it was possible to tell if someone had truly undergone inner purification, becoming transformed into the image of Christ.

“It is very difficult to tell but usually it is accompanied by a wonderful sense of humour.”

Humour, the ability to laugh and not take ourselves too seriously, puts the grueling process of inner transformation into perspective. If I am self-centered instead of God-centered, everything becomes intense and dramatic. When I take my eyes off myself, **my** faith, **my** religious practices, **my** spiritual 'progress', **my** sins and rather look at my Saviour, everything comes back into the proper perspective. I am filled with joy, the joy of the Lord.

There are many amusing stories about the saints which illustrate their joy. While on a journey to visit one of her convents, a donkey dumped St. Teresa of Avila into a stream of freezing cold water. Standing in her water-logged, heavy habit, she yelled at God,

“If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few!”

Did you ever wonder how the plain, hard-working, celibate, 17th-century Shakers got their name? It is because they shook under the power of God and they danced with joy! One of their dancing songs is *'Tis a Gift to be Simple*

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

No wonder they were persecuted and chased out of Europe; they scandalized staid, proper, miserable Christians. Just like when King David danced before the Lord with complete abandonment.

As Catholics, do we look on with scorn when we see anyone who is happy, moving and dancing in the Spirit? Remember how God reacted not only to David but to his wife Michal;

[2 Samuel 6:17-22] As the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart.

When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"

David answered his wife, "**I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes...**"

I am willing to wager that almost all religious, faithful Catholics would not model the joyful David but scowl along with his wife Michal at such a scene. Yet joy is not just for Pentecostals; joy is also for intelligent, sophisticated Catholics. As C.S. Lewis explains,

"Joy is the serious business of heaven".

Even though icons and holy cards often depict the saints and the entire Holy Family looking miserable and weak with tears streaming down their pale faces, the truth is the saints lived in God's Presence and in His joy. St. Francis of Assisi is the most famous, joyful saint. Look at our pope, whose namesake is Francis; his very countenance radiates authenticity, kindness, joy and the love of God. It is time to allow God to change our mentality and spirituality into one that embraces the Resurrection and Pentecost, not just the Passion.