

Walking with Mary on the Path to Holiness

Wednesday, June 17, 2020 ~ Mary and Perfect Joy



I have a confession to make. It's really no secret; the Sisters know, my students can attest. I have a huge devotion to Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati. I don't know what gives it away...Maybe it's the 24 by 36 inch poster I have of him in my classroom or the hundreds of holy cards that I pass out or that I celebrate his birthday each year or that I find a way to incorporate his example into the lessons that I teach. Whatever it is, I realize that I have a strong fascination with this young man that died of polio at the age of 24, a disease he contracted from helping the poor. I first learned about him from a little book in our convent library, *The Soul of Pier Giorgio Frassati*;

this unassuming book portrayed a vibrant individual who was compassionate about helping the poor, who was head over heels in love with our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and with our Lady. He did not have an easy life; while he was from a very wealthy family, he did not have spiritual or emotional support from his father, an agnostic, or his mother, a nominal Catholic. He would pray his grace before meals outside of the dining room so as not to upset his parents, he sacrificed going to America in order to be with his family who needed him. Even with these sufferings, he was noted for his joy, his love for life. I have come to realize that what draws me to the saints is their simplicity in loving, their acceptance of demanding circumstances without complaining, their deep abiding joy in the midst of sufferings.

In a letter to his sister, he wrote,

“You ask me whether I am in good spirits. How could I not be so? As long as Faith gives me strength I will always be joyful; every Catholic cannot but be joyful. Sadness ought to be banished from Catholic souls. For suffering is a far different thing from sadness, which is the worst disease of all. It is almost always caused by lack of Faith. But the purpose for which we have been created shows us the

path along which we should go, perhaps strewn with many thorns, but not a sad path. Even in the midst of intense suffering, it is one of joy” (Frassati, 157).

He wrote this a few months before his death in the midst of his many struggles, trying to graduate from the university, trying to be an encouragement his family and friends. From his example and many others, I think it is possible for us to live a life of joy.

Another inspiring figure that displays these same characteristics is St. John Paul II. I have found it remarkable that one who suffered so much from an early age, losing his mother and his brother, being left alone in a country torn apart by war after his father’s death, could remain hopeful. According to worldly standards, he had every right to be bitter but he was not. He inspired countless individuals to hope; he was able to get so many people through the harrowing times of Nazism and Communism. He had joy in the midst of the difficulties that life brought him. Examples like these inspire me to keep going and not give up when things seem unbearable.

On the occasion of this fiftieth anniversary of priestly ordination, he wrote a work entitled *Gift and Mystery*. Here he shows a great spiritual insight into the lessons he learned. He explains,

“The outbreak of the war took me away from my studies and from the University. In that period I also lost my father, the last remaining member of my immediate family. All this brought with it, objectively, *a progressive detachment* from my earlier plans; in a way it was like being uprooted from the soil in which, up till that moment, my humanity had grown. But the process was not merely negative. At the same time a light was beginning to shine ever more brightly in the back of my mind: *the Lord wants me to become a priest*. One day I saw this with great clarity: it was like an interior illumination which brought with it the joy and certainty of a new vocation. And this awareness filled me with great interior peace” (34-35).

Pope John Paul’s perspective gives us insight into nurturing joy in our lives.

I cannot give examples of joy in the midst of suffering without mentioning Mother Teresa. Hers was a life of trial but she always radiated God's joy. She herself wrote, "A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love" (73). While it may not make sense to the world, we have all experienced how amazing it has felt to be truly generous with others. "He gives most who gives with joy" (73). Again, "True love is love that causes us pain that hurts, and yet brings us joy. That is why we must pray to God and ask Him to give us the courage to love" (75). An author commenting on Mother Teresa's suffering writes, "joy endures suffering in hope" (DeLorenzo). She witnessed this to so many people.

Who did these great saints imitate? Our Blessed Lord, of course, but also our Lady. She is the one who teaches us how to respond to the trials of life in a spirit of joy. While there are many examples from her life that I could use, I will focus on just a few. Let us first look at the Visitation (Luke 1:39-56). After she received the visit of the angel, she immediately planned to go help her cousin Elizabeth. That is what the phrase, "she went in haste" (Luke 1:39) means. She did not think of herself, her pregnancy, her upcoming marriage; she was about helping someone in need. She did not stick around and figure out a way to explain the angel's visit to Joseph; she left that to God. He would find a way to tell Joseph of Jesus' birth and his part in the Holy Family. I know that I would have fretted about how to handle the situation. Mary did not; she trusted. God had always been present to her and He was not going to fail her now. Many times, we do not experience joy because we are too focused in ourselves. When we look at others and forget about ourselves, we are brought up into God's joy and peace. Quoting Dom A. Guillerand, Abbot Jean-Charles Nault states, "Sadness is looking at oneself; joy is looking at God" (143).

The Magnificat, her prayer at Elizabeth's house, bears this out (Luke 1:46-55). I want to read part of that to you, it begins "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness" (Luke 1:46-48). Mary knows that everything she has comes from God; she is utterly dependent upon Him. When she speaks of her lowliness, this is not in any false humility. She knows that she needs God and that He will take care of her every need. She doesn't have to worry about how things will turn out.

Throughout the rest of the prayer, she declares all of God's great work; it is all about what God has been doing. I will read, "The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him. He has shown might with his arm...He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy, according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (Luke 1:49-55). She is truly filled with joy reflecting on all that God has done for her and for His people. Mary is able to bring this joy and share it with Elizabeth.

Mary knows that God keeps His promises; also, she knows that if He has accomplished something in the past, He will continue doing it for His children. One can spend too much time worrying about how things will turn out and not get anywhere, only more distressed and distracted from what is most important. This sustained her in the flight into Egypt, the loss of Joseph, Jesus' public ministry, His passion death and resurrection.

She desires us to have joy as well. I think of the Wedding Feast of Cana (John 2:1-11). A wedding is a time of rejoicing, especially for people in ancient times; one's wedding would have been one of life's highlights. Mary was present in that joy. We need to bring her into our joys as well as our sorrows. She wanted them to have all they needed in their celebration. Also, she wanted the apostles to find their joy in Jesus, showing them His power and divinity.

Her motherly presence with the apostles continued after Jesus' death where she maintained the early Church. Between our Lord's death and resurrection, the disciples turned to our Lady for comfort. She alone awaited the resurrection in hope; no one except the Virgin most faithful believed He would rise from the dead. Luke relates at the end of his Gospel at the scene of the Ascension, "Then he led them [out] as far as Bethany.... As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God" (Luke 24:50-53). In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke continues with the events after Jesus' Ascension and includes the role of Mary, "All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (1:14). It was Mary who

encouraged them after Jesus' Ascension. It would have been difficult to see their Lord depart from them; nothing could really prepare them. They found great encouragement in Mary.

I have done this a little backwards; instead of starting with a definition of joy, I have used examples of joy. Now I would like to get to some definitions and distinctions, then conclude with applications.

Fr. Hardon defines "joy" as "the feeling aroused by the expectation or possession of some good" (298). While it does come out in specific emotions experienced in the body, it is much deeper; they are in the higher faculties of the soul. It is connected to the virtue of hope. I know that God desires my salvation; He wants me with Him in Heaven. Nothing can really disturb this knowledge; it is deeply embedded in the soul. While things may happen exteriorly, God is with me, taking care of me every step of the way. As a result, I respond to this with joy. It is like when you give someone you love a gift. Most of the time you want him or her to open it in front of you; you want to see the person's reaction. Delight in what you gave him or her shows you the recipient's appreciation for the gift. The same with God. Everything that happens is a gift from Him. He wants us to receive everything as coming from Him, either through His active or permissive will. If He has allowed it, He will use it to help us to grow in greater love of Himself and others.

Also, joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the fruits of the Holy Spirit as, "perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory" (CCC 1832). Through our openness to the Holy Spirit, we begin to experience an anticipation of Heaven. Heaven is union with the beloved; union produces joy (Martinez, 227). Joy is listed second, right after charity; it is also grouped with peace. These three are listed first for a reason. Being in relationship with God who is love results in joy. We are not called to keep that to ourselves but to share it with others. "We are too often unhappy because we too often keep charity in an obscure corner of our soul, so to speak, and are not aware of our joy. We do not experience the heavenly virtue that the Spirit pours into us; we do not realize the treasure that we possess" (Martinez, 228). Joy is definitely something that cannot be nurtured without sharing it with others.

I think our Lord's discourse at the Last Supper expresses this: "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love...." "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you." (John 15:9-14). Joy starts with love and is nourished through love: knowing we are loved by God and sharing that love with others.

The more we turn to God in prayer, the more this joy will grow and develop. Sometimes we allow anxiety to creep in, this feeling of worry or nervousness that is related to the unknown. This can cause us to lose sight of joy; the devil wants us to be anxious and concerned for then we do not trust in God; we forget His care and concern for us in every aspect of our lives. If He cares for the birds of the sky, how much more will He care for us His children? Yet it is so easy to forget this and let our natural anxieties creep in.

In overcoming our anxieties by being convinced of His love, we want others to know this joy. We cannot keep this joy to ourselves; it is something that we need to express to others, to share with others, laying down our lives for others. It will not be in the big things primarily but mostly in the little things. That is how it will continue to grow. I am reminded of a quote from my patroness, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity. She said, "A soul united to God ought to be a living smile which gives him and radiates him." When others see us at peace, they will want the same. We can give something so small as a smile.

Now it is important to distinguish joy from pleasure and happiness. I have gone to philosopher Peter Kreeft. He explains, "Pleasure is in the body. Happiness is in the mind and feelings. Joy is deep in the heart, the spirit, the center of the self. The way to pleasure is power and prudence. The way to happiness is moral goodness. The way to joy is sanctity, loving God with your whole heart and your neighbor as yourself." It is also vital to remember that pleasure and happiness are good as God has created them; He desires us to be happy and enjoy life in the way He has planned.

How do we keep our joy in the midst of suffering? Since its source is the rational will, it needs to be nurtured through our intellect; by knowing of God's love for us and His plans for our happiness, we can then choose joy. We need to constantly reflect on all that God has done

for us. This should be our attitude. Our joy should be found in the Lord. He takes good care of us. If we suffer anything it is because it is for our good.

Through the reading of Sacred Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, we come to see throughout all time God has been present. Pope Benedict XVI stated in *Verbum Domini*,

Celebrations can be organized, but not joy. According to the Scripture, joy is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22) who enables us to enter into the word and enables the divine word to enter into us and to bear fruit for eternal life. By proclaiming God's word in the power of the Holy Spirit, we also wish to share the source of true joy, not a superficial and fleeting joy, but the joy born of the awareness that the Lord Jesus alone has words of everlasting life (cf. Jn 6:68). (§123)

In Him, we find everything – peace, joy, hope.

Another way that we can be encouraged in hope is through the examen prayer, specifically its focus on gratitude. At the conclusion of each day, we should look at all that God has done for us. He is present in our lives; the evil one does not want us to see this. He does not want us to see God's love and kindness toward us. If we can see how He has been present, we can be reminded that He will always be there for us, guiding us and supporting us along the way.

Spending time with our Eucharistic Lord, in Adoration or Mass is a powerful way to experience joy. Knowing that He is there waiting for us, wishing to speak to us, tells us how much He loves us and wants us to know of His love. Think of Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus. They walked with Jesus; they spoke with Him. At the end of their time with Him, they reflected, "Were not our hearts burning within us as we walked along?" (Luke 24:32).

So often we forget how much He loves us. Knowing that we are loved even when we do not deserve His love is so consoling. Pope Benedict wrote in *Deus Caritas Est*, "the fact that man, through a life of fidelity to the one God, comes to experience himself as loved by God, and discovers joy in truth and in righteousness—a joy in God which becomes his essential happiness: 'Whom do I have in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire

besides you ... for me it is good to be near God' (Ps 73 [72]:25, 28)' (§9). To truly understand we are loved by God brings one an intense, deep joy.

Joy comes with the fact that we are invited to a relationship with God; He loves us, He cares for us. He will not disappoint us. Disappointments come from a myopic vision. We need to see the bigger picture. It is not just about this life but about eternity. In the Gospel, our Lord speaks about entering into His joy. It is a place. God dwells within us.

Pope Francis writes in his apostolic exhortation on the call to holiness in today's world, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, "Hard times may come, when the cross casts its shadow, yet nothing can destroy the supernatural joy that 'adapts and changes, but always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved'. That joy brings deep security, serene hope and a spiritual fulfilment that the world cannot understand or appreciate" (§ 125). Our times desperately need to see the Christian witness of joy.

Let us look to Mary, cause of our joy, for our inspiration; she shows us how to live joy, by receiving God and sharing Him with others. Look also to the example of the saints, "A sad saint is a sorry saint." In other words, there is no such thing as a saint who does not witness to joy. We have received so much from our Lord; we are called to share this with others. We can give them the joy of the Gospel through the example of our lives.

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