

JOY IN SUFFERING

‘NOW I REJOICE in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.’ (Col 1:24)

Fortune of grace, fortune of suffering

In this statement of St Paul we have a great mystery which has baffled the human mind for nearly 2000 years. Another Paul, Pope Paul VI, just some 25 years ago spoke of this same mystery at a General Audience (July 26, 1974). After he had given several addresses following the Church's celebration of Pentecost with its corresponding outpouring of the Spirit, tongues of fire, charisms, and joy, the Pope said that this vision needed to be corrected with a second vision—the vision of the Cross, for ‘the Holy Spirit does not take the Cross away from human reality.’ He stated that the ‘fortune of grace’ and the ‘fortune of suffering’ are two experiences which ‘are not only possible together but are compatible.’ Joy can follow suffering, but it can also co-exist with suffering. ‘The Christian can at the same time, have two different, opposite experiences which become complementary: sorrow and joy.’

Always a great mystery

This relationship between joy and suffering is no less baffling to us in these times than it was to the Christians in the time of Paul of Tarsus. Knowing that this great mystery is always greater than any meagre understanding we may come to possess, I wish to pursue here a study of this relationship between joy and suffering in the Christian. For joy and suffering are two realities which are too often separated and one emphasized to the detriment of the other. A right understanding of them is necessary for our own spiritual lives, but also for the Church's work of evangelization. Yes, there is the Cross and its demands, but there is the Resurrection. Neither one is understood or can exist without the other.

As the *Catechism* says: ‘Catechesis has to reveal in all clarity the joy and the demands of the way of Christ. (no. 1697)

Method to be followed

My procedure here will be first to address the apparent contradiction presented by such a passage of St Paul, claiming that joy is experienced in the midst of suffering. Here it will be necessary to look at a Christian Anthropology. Then we want to investigate how joy is made present to a person in the midst of suffering from a theological point of sight. It is Christ who makes joy possible. By being baptized into Christ's death we ‘put on the new man’ and through divine grace we receive the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. These supernatural virtues colour the Christian's experience and we will thus look at each of them to see how they bear on our question of joy experienced simultaneously with suffering. In each of these considerations I will try to cite examples from the lives of the saints to see practical applications of an otherwise lofty theology.

1. Christian anthropology

The fact that two contraries cannot exist simultaneously in the same subject is the well-known principle of non-contradiction. It is really this principle that is being applied to St Paul's claim to be ‘rejoicing in his sufferings.’

Our human make-up

What must be understood here is our human make-up and the necessary distinctions between intellect and will, and the emotions or passions. When St Thomas Aquinas treats human acts he sees the soul as including both the faculties of the intellect and will, as well as a sensitive part of the soul, of appetites which give rise to passions, and he quotes St John Damascene who states that ‘Passion is a movement of the sensitive appetite when we imagine good or evil; in other words, passion is a movement of the irrational soul,

when we think of good or evil' (*De fide orthd.* II)(1). Such movements or passions can lie either in the concupiscible part or the irascible part, depending on whether the good or evil reacted to is with ease or with difficulty apprehended or avoided. Now the passions are absolutely necessary for human life and are neither good or bad in themselves. In fact there should be a correspondence between the passions and the acts of the intellect and will. To quote St Thomas:

`Just as it is better that man both will good and do it in his external act, so also does it belong to the perfection of the moral good that he be moved to good, not only in respect of his will, but also in respect of his sensitive appetite.(2)

Joy and sorrow

From our perspective what is important is that what is apprehended sensibly in the concupiscible or irascible part of the soul may give rise to a passion of joy, for example, while what is apprehended intellectually in the intellectual part of the soul may give rise to sorrow, and vice-versa.(3)

Thus there is no contradiction in itself for one to `rejoice in his sufferings' given an understanding of Christian anthropology. While a suffering in the appetitive soul may generally be more intense than a joy existing in the intellectual soul, the latter is deeper and more profound and it is all the more so when divine realities are made accessible through the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity. It is to these that we now turn our attention.

2. Faith

Faith is the very entrance into the Christian life. It puts the believer into a new realm of reality—seeing, though obscurely, realities that once lay hidden to him. To not `see' something with the mind is a great suffering for the human person. Misunderstanding and confusion cause great torment to a person, particularly when the reality one is trying to apprehend is intimately co-involved with the subject.

Seeing Christ in faith

Suffering is a human reality which baffles even the believer. But faith does give us an understanding and an `assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb 11:11) In faith the believer can come to see the value and meaning of human suffering, for through faith we can peer into the mystery of Christ's sufferings. And this `seeing' and partial `understanding' which bring forth conviction can give rise to joy in the soul.

John Paul II takes up this question in his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*. In speaking of the same text of St Paul (Col. 1:24) the Holy Father says that `these words have, as it were, the value of a final discovery, which is accompanied by joy.... The joy comes from the discovery of the meaning of suffering' (no. 1). It is in faith that the believer can see his suffering as truly transformed and raised by virtue of the Redemption wrought by Jesus. Whereas suffering often consumes a person interiorly, `the discovery of the salvific meaning of suffering in union with Christ transforms this depressing feeling. Faith in sharing in the suffering of Christ brings with it the interior certainty that the suffering person "completes what is lacking in Christ's afflictions."' (no. 27)

Behind the Cross

Thus, in faith, we can see the light of the Resurrection which shines from behind the Cross, illuminating it and giving it value and meaning. Whereas Christ crucified is `a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles' (1 Cor 1:23) it is the power and wisdom of God for those who are called in faith. Moreover, in faith, with St Paul and the early Romans

`we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.' (Rom 5:3-4)

This is confirmed by the Catechism (no 163) where it states that:

'Faith makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, the goal of our journey here below. Then we shall see God 'face to face' (1 Cor 13:12), 'as he is' (1 Jn 3:2). So faith is already the beginning of eternal life.'

3. Hope

The supernatural virtue of hope is a 'crisis' virtue and is too often forgotten in our own day. It is that virtue which can be termed 'the muscle of the will.' And the virtue of hope can be a real cause of joy in suffering, especially during difficult times. Turning to the Scriptures we see an example of this in the *Letter to the Hebrews*.

Hope in the *Letter to the Hebrews*

The author of *Hebrews* calls his Christological masterpiece a 'word of encouragement' (13:22) and it is that *par excellence*. Much in the *Letter* evidences the fact that the community is undergoing persecution and suffering a great deal. The early Christian community is urged to reflect back on the past:

'Recall the days gone by when, after you had been enlightened [by faith], you endured a great contest of suffering. At times you were publicly exposed to insult and trial.' (10:32-33)

Our author exhorts them to 'endure your trials as the discipline of God' (12:7) and tells them 'to strengthen [their] drooping hands and [their] weak knees.' (12:12) *Hebrews* argues that Jesus the High Priest is our hope and our joy. We have in *Hebrews* a theological treatise on hope to which intimately united is real Christian joy. We, with the early Christians, are exhorted to 'keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who inspires and perfects our faith. For the sake of the joy which lay before him he endured the cross, heedless of its shame.' (12:2) It is Christ who is the hope which 'like a sure and firm anchor ... extends beyond the veil.' (6:19) And it is in this hope, Christ, that we are to find our joy, even amidst sufferings, as St Paul encourages the Romans when he tells them to 'rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.' (Rom 12:12)

A pledge of eternal life

Joy follows upon hope in two manners. On one hand, hope prolongs the act of adhesion of faith in a desire of pressing the reality in which we believe; namely the future good or eternal life and thus joy is in the pledge of possession. On the other hand hope is the virtue of man *in via* toward eternal life which gives the trust in the grace of God allowing us to overcome the difficulties along the way. This too brings great joy. It is enough to think of the great trust St Thérèse of Lisieux had in the grace of Christ and the joy it brought her.

In the first case we have the pledge without yet receiving the reward. The will is stretched toward what is loved and we are able to 'be patient in trial.' We see 'dimly as in a mirror' (1 Cor 13:12) but it is enough to draw us forward. St Peter speaks of joy as consequent to such hope when he says:

'There is cause for rejoicing here. You may for a time have to suffer the distress of many trials; but this is so that your faith, which is more precious than the passing splendour of fire-tried gold, may by its genuineness lead to praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ appears.' (1 Pet 1:6-7)

Joy comes in possession and what is possessed here is the cable which is fastened to the anchor of hope that is already in the heavenly sanctuary. We do not have our reward yet, but see as from a distance. Like those trusting ancients in the litany of *Hebrews'* chapter 11, we have not yet obtained what has been promised but 'see and salute it from afar' (11:13). Our lot is, in the words of St Paul of the Cross, to 'be concealed in the crucified Jesus' and to 'be changed by love into the divine good pleasure' until we rest untroubled in eternal joy.

As the *Catechism* puts it:

'The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle.[cf. 2 Tim 4] Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes.' (no 2015)

Trust in God

Our second distinction of hope, and hence, of joy, is that trust in the grace which God gives us to endure every kind of difficulty. Being alone in trials and tribulation brings sadness and disgust, at times even despair. But the virtue of hope also has as its object the trust in God's grace for the present difficulty being experienced. The exercise of the virtue in these instances brings great joy, for 'our help is from the Lord.' (Ps 121:2)

Joy of this type is consequent upon the parting words of Jesus to his disciples: 'And know that I am with you always until the end of the world.' (Mt 28:20) Confidence in Jesus' words are a joy for the disciple. Paul learns this when he prays three times for God to remove the 'thorn from his flesh' but Jesus responds: 'my grace is enough for you.' (2 Cor 12:7-9) Again, we see this no better than in one of the most joyous saints, St Thérèse of Lisieux. When she was crushed in her own littleness and misery, the words of Isaiah came to her which were instrumental in letting her place full confidence in the grace of Christ. Thérèse writes of her 'trial of faith' toward the end of her life.

'Ah! Never did words more tender and more melodious come to give joy to my soul. The elevator which must raise me to heaven is your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain little and become this more and more.'

Hope does not disappoint

Hans von Balthasar writes:

'We bear the superabundant treasures of Christ's glory in earthen vessels, that the superabundance of strength may be ascribed to God, not to us.... Man today, more than ever before, needs to be on his guard, remembering that all he can achieve by his own power (and what can he not?) has no part with what 'the Spirit speaks to the Churches.(4)

Knowing this well, as did St Thérèse, brings great joy to the soul, for we recognize quickly that our 'cups are empty' and without hesitation direct our thirst to the side of Christ from which all graces flow. In such a way the theological virtue of hope procures for us joy even in tribulation.

'Christian hope unfolds from the beginning of Jesus' preaching in the proclamation of the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes raise our hope toward heaven as the new Promised Land; they trace the path that leads through the trials that await the disciples of Jesus. But through the merits of Jesus Christ and of his Passion, God keeps us in the 'hope that does not disappoint.' [Rom 5:5] Hope is the 'sure and steadfast anchor of the soul ... that enters ... where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf.' [Heb 6:19-20] Hope is also a weapon that protects us in the struggle of salvation: 'Let us ... put on the breastplate of faith and charity, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.' (1 Thes 5:8) It affords us joy even under trial: 'Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation.' (Rom 12:12) Hope is expressed and nourished in prayer, especially in the *Our Father*, the summary of everything that hope leads us to desire.' (*Catechism*, no. 1820)

4. Charity

We come now to our third source of joy, and here we speak of a real union (albeit imperfect in this life) with the Beloved—a real possession in the soul. Here properly is treated supernatural charity, with joy as its effect. The object here is none less than the One whom we love and with whom we suffer.

Joy through charity

St Thomas treats the topic of 'joy' after he speaks of the theological virtue of charity.(5) He says:

'Joy is caused by love, either through the presence of the thing loved [I love my wife and she is present with me here—thus my joy] or because the proper good of the thing loved exists and endures in it [My wife who is away and whom I love is enjoying good health].'(6)

St Thomas goes on to say that God is in those who love him and spiritual joy is caused by charity. Through

the indwelling of the Holy Trinity, even in this life God is present to those who love him. And it is this 'being in his presence' through divine charity that brings joy.

If we are to be with our Lord, we will have to be with him both in joy and in suffering. In Jesus' presence we will experience deep joy, even though we be transfixed with him to a tree. We know this to be true in experience and we know it to be true in the Church's 'great cloud of witnesses' (Heb 12:1). St Paul exclaims that he finds joy in the sufferings he endures (cf. Col 1:24) and tells another community that together they are continually carrying about in their bodies the dying of Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 4:10). And how is it possible for Paul to have joy in 'bearing this dying' in his body? It can only be because Paul is already in some degree of possession of Christ dwelling within him. The Crucified is present with Paul in his sufferings. Paul himself will answer our question when he exclaims:

'I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me.' (Gal 2:19-20)

Example of the saints

The mystic and preacher of Jesus Crucified, St Paul, is not the only one who experienced great joys in his sufferings. Anyone who draws close to Christ Crucified will also profit in such joy. St Paul of the Cross, founder of the Passionists, suffered very much for our Lord but did so with jubilation. In a word, embracing Christ meant embracing thorns, but St Paul of the Cross did this with joy because it was Christ whom he was embracing. As he wrote to Agnes Grazi:

'I heard this sweetest saying spoken to me by the Saviour: 'Son whoever embraces me embraces thorns.' Do you believe my daughter that my soul does not understand that but God makes it understand with this saying,... that just as our dear Jesus wished that his most holy life here on earth should be always in the midst of the thorns, pains, labours, fatigues, toils, anguish, contempt, calumnies, sorrows, scourges, nails, thorns and the most bitter death of the cross so he made me understand that by embracing him I ought to lead my life in the midst of pains. And ah with what jubilation my poor soul embraced all kinds of suffering!'

We see this same 'joy in suffering' in saints such as St Thérèse of Lisieux, St Bruno of Chartreuse, and Blessed Angela of Foligno.(7) All of these persons experienced deeply joy in loving their Lord in the midst of trials. The joys that lie deep in the soul, resultant from being in the presence of the Blessed Trinity, do not negate the sufferings being experienced but rather make them tolerable. Bearing such sufferings with love makes them efficacious for the Church, filling up what is yet lacking to the sufferings of the Body of Christ.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do here has been simply to eliminate some common objections to the possibility of experiencing joy in the midst of sufferings. We saw how joy and suffering can be simultaneously present in the soul by studying the structure itself of the soul. We also looked to the supernatural habits of faith, hope and charity to see theologically how these habits can be the cause of a real, deep joy in the believer, even while he or she may be experiencing some of the gravest trials and sufferings. In all of this we humbly acknowledge the great mystery of human suffering and know that its depths will only be plumbed in the next life. But we do know with certitude that Christian joy is found only in Christ. We come to the same conclusion as that of John McDermott, S.J. who concludes his biblical treatment on human suffering with these words:

'The Christian mystery of self-sacrificial love transmutes, like the fabled elixir of the alchemists, the very meaning of suffering, from dross metal into precious gold tested by fire. What had been perceived as the most negative and oppressive element of human existence, something that was to be fled or overcome by prayer, ascetical practices or philosophical wisdom now can be accepted with patience and even joy.'(8)

As Pope John Paul II exhorts:

'Thus, let us all gather beneath the Cross of Jesus with Mary in union with all those who suffer for on this Cross is the 'Redeemer of man', the Man of Sorrows, who has taken upon himself the physical and moral sufferings of the people of all times, so that in love they [and we] may find the salvific meaning of their sorrows and valid answers to all of their questions.' (*Salvifici doloris*, no 31)

Footnotes

1. Cf. *S. Theol.* I-II, 22, 3.
2. *Ibid.*, I-II, 24, 3c.
3. Cf. *Ibid.*, I-II, 35, 4c.
4. Hans Urs von Balthasar. *Church and World* (New York: Herder and Herder 1967) 15-16.
5. Already this tells us where real joy is found, namely, in the will, the intellectual appetite, as opposed to the sensitive appetite. In fact, because of the nature of passion, St Thomas says that joy is less a passion than sorrow (cf. *S. Th.* I-II, 22, 1).
6. *S. Th.* II-II, 28,1. The bracketed text is my own insertion by way of explanation.
7. Integral to St Thérèse's teaching is that joy cannot come without union with Jesus' sufferings. We see this same concomitant joy in the person of St Bruno who constantly experienced joy in his heart because of the union with God in his soul. Finally we can say the same of Blessed Angela of Foligno. In her *Memorial* she speaks of an experience she had in which she realized God's indwelling in her. She was then content to lie hidden on the `bed' of the cross and said that `since that time there has not been a day or a night in which I did not continually experience this joy of the humanity of Christ.
8. John M. McDermott, *The Bible on Human Suffering* (St. Paul Publications 1990) 151-152.

Christ lives in me

Saint Paul speaks of various sufferings and, in particular, of those in which the first Christians became sharers `for the sake of Christ'. These sufferings enable the recipients of that Letter to share in the work of the Redemption, accomplished through the suffering and death of the Redeemer. *The eloquence of the Cross and death* is, however, completed by *the eloquence of the Resurrection*. Man finds in the Resurrection a completely new light, which helps him to go forward through the thick darkness of humiliations, doubts, hopelessness and persecution. Therefore the Apostle will also write in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: `For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too' (2 Cor 1:5) Elsewhere he addresses to his recipients words of encouragement: `May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.'(2 Thes 4:5)...

The very participation in Christ's suffering finds, in these apostolic expressions, as it were a twofold dimension. If one becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ, this happens because Christ *has opened his suffering to man*, because he himself in his redemptive suffering has become, in a certain sense, a sharer in all human sufferings. Man, discovering through faith the redemptive suffering of Christ, also discovers in it his own sufferings; he *rediscovers them, through faith*, enriched with a new content and new meaning.

This discovery caused Saint Paul to write particularly strong words in the Letter to the Galatians: `I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me: and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.' (Gal 2:19-20) Faith enables the author of these words to know that love which led Christ to the Cross. And if he loved us in this way, suffering and dying, then with this suffering and death of his he *lives in the one whom he loved in this way*; he lives in the man: in Paul. And living in him—to the degree that Paul, conscious of this through faith, responds to his love with love—Christ also becomes in a particular way *united to the man*, to Paul, *through the Cross*. This union caused Paul to write, in the same Letter to the Galatians, other words as well, no less strong: `But far be it from me to *glory* except in the *Cross* of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.' (Gal 6:14) (Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Salvifici doloris* 20)

Reverend Michael Champagne is a member of the Community of Jesus Crucified. Ordained in 1994, he is chaplain to a Medical Centre in Lafayette, Louisiana, U.S.A.