

UNFELT JOY

IN an age like ours, when feeling predominates over thought, the title of this article will strike a very bizarre note. And yet the fact that joy can be experienced without the grosser exhilaration of the senses is a truth witnessed to by the saints in every age. The Kingdom of God in the soul is a foretaste of the joys of heaven, and if the separated soul can experience the beatific joy of gazing with unclouded vision on its God, then surely it will be able in some measure to exercise a royal independence for tasting the divine delights even in this life. Joy is an experience which normally causes the whole man to vibrate, but although "cabin'd, cribb'd, confined" through its companionship with the body, there seems no adequate reason why the immaterial soul divinized by the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity should not be able at times to vibrate with a joy that is wholly spiritual. If the faculties of the soul shot through with the divine splendour could not occasionally breathe the more rarified atmosphere of the supernatural without the cacophony of the senses, its deeply embedded hopes of immortality would lose their tonic effect, and we should soon begin to wilt under the weight of our material surroundings.

The stammerings of the mystics point to an experience which escapes the power of rational analysis. They describe darkness in terms of light, and their growing contentment would seem to keep pace with an ever-deepening conviction of the incomprehensibility of God. They are happy and peaceful to rest in silent acknowledgement of a Greatness which makes them increasingly inarticulate. The further they penetrate into this "forest of the night," the less anxious they become. There are no signposts to guide them, but they are led by a dim radiance which makes their path faintly luminous.

We are not all mystics, but we are all subject to the strengthening influences of the Holy Spirit who at times mercifully upsets our stereotyped notions of reality and

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places us upon an airy pinnacle beyond the reach of the most refined emotional experience. This is somewhat analogous in the natural order to the spiritual perception of the artist, whose unusual sensitiveness to beauty is almost like an added faculty to his soul. The indwelling of the Three Divine Persons points at least to the possibility of the soul sharing in the artist's experience on the supernatural plane. If the mind of the artist works intuitively in its first glowing intimations, the Holy Spirit makes the soul sensitive and responsive to intuitions wholly divine. Like the three wise kings who were guided by starlight through the blackness of the eastern night to the feet of the King of Glory, so the soul by harkening to the constant inspirational movements of God is guided by an unwavering light into regions of pure joy incapable of being explored with the dull weapons of sense.

A definition of happiness in terms of unfelt joy would not find its way into a textbook on ethics. But there may be more in it than meets the eye. In the ordinary sense, happiness and joy are not always synonymous. Happiness usually suggests a settled disposition capable of being enlivened by occasional bursts of joy. It is more often allied with tranquillity of spirit, whereas joy commonly denotes a more exhilarating experience than can be engendered by the utmost serenity.

But what of that peace which "surpasseth all understanding" mentioned by St. Paul? Is it not likely to be capable of producing a vibration of joy in the higher regions of the soul? Like a gentle wind which ruffles the tranquil surface of a mountain lake and transforms it into ripples of movement, so perhaps does the Breath of the Holy Spirit enliven the peace of the soul with ripples of pure joy which cause it to vibrate with a consciousness wholly spiritual.

Launch out into the deep, Our Lord said to St. Peter, and the reader may well protest that he has been launched into very deep waters. What is the practical use of trying to put into words what would seem to be completely unintelligible except perhaps to a favoured few? It was Dante who said that the highest themes are those which most transcend the

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resources of human language. But since the highest theme of all is within the reach of every soul possessing sanctifying grace, the inadequacy of human language should not deter us from attempting a humble exploration into its hidden depths. The treasures of divine grace are at the disposal of all, and an artistic endowment forms no part of our necessary equipment for penetrating into those mysterious regions inhabited by the "light inaccessible."

Our Lord did not hesitate to expound His sublime doctrine of the fountain of water "springing up into life everlasting" to the sin-laden Samaritan woman. Perhaps only Jesus would have considered her worthy of such a revelation. If it is true that the riches of the supernatural cannot be plumbed in the vehement waters of this life, it is also true that we lessen our experience of them by measuring the gifts of God according to our own standards of giving. No doubt we believe that God's gifts are out of all proportion to our own, but this in itself is not likely to spur us on unless we also believe that they increase the soul's capacity for giving. "God's grace enlarges the soul, so to speak, while filling it and fills it while enlarging it."¹

The time has come to descend from airy pinnacles to more concrete realities. A saint has appeared in our own times who is the embodiment of everything most contrary to the spirit of the age. The humble virgin of Lisieux passed her short life in the hidden obscurity of a Carmelite cell, but God has placed her upon a pinnacle of light to be our director and guide through the modern maze of conflicting ideals. Her message is so tightly packed with good things that to parade them all at once before our enchanted gaze would induce the blurred vision of the surrealist whose quaint strokes are the measure of a hazy impression rather than of a settled glance.

The message of St. Theresa is a message of joy. But she is very anxious that the tidings of joy wrapped up in her message should not be misinterpreted. The disconcerting facility displayed by many of her ardent admirers for inter-

¹ *Mary*, by Fr. Canice, O.M.Cap., p. 171.

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preting her "little way" is faintly reminiscent of the novice who wanted to write off at once to all her friends and relations and tell them about it. The saint warned her to be very careful how she explained it, as many would miss the point.

In order to discover what St. Theresa means by joy, it is necessary to step off the beaten track of surface impressions and explore the less-frequented paths of hidden sacrifice. The saint was fond of saying that she preferred the monotony of hidden sacrifice to the joys of ecstasy. But it is equally evident that her constant fidelity to sacrifice was the source of what she describes as a refined joy. "If you only knew how great my joy is in giving pleasure to Jesus through being deprived of all joy . . . this is the very refinement of joy—the joy we do not even feel."² It looks as though her hidden sacrifices were the carriers of a spiritual joy not sufficiently ebullient to run over into her feelings. There is no shirking of the difficulty we all experience when faced with sacrifice. It is the first step that makes us shudder and hesitate. "It is difficult at times," the saint writes, "but God never refuses the first grace which gives the courage to overcome ourselves, and if the soul corresponds it will at once find itself in a region of light."³ The first step has often to be made in the dark, but it brings light in its train, and perhaps a ripple of tranquil joy which sustains the soul in its onward march "from victory to victory."

It is interesting to note that she describes the soul's initial movement in sacrifice, which to us seems often utterly unshared with Another as a correspondence to grace. This is sound theology which teaches that the grace of God anticipates, as well as accompanies, our good actions. The saint expresses this profound truth very naively by saying that Jesus "helps us without seeming to."⁴ But even when the soul remains in obscurity after taking the first painful step, there is no need to become disconcerted. "Jésus peut se

² *Letter IV* to Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart.

³ *Counsels and Reminiscences*.

⁴ *Letter II* to Céline.

catcher, mais on le devine . . . ”⁵ No doubt she was able to, but our faith is less robust. Fortunately, however, we are not obliged to follow her along the dizzy mountain paths. Her teaching is for all and she is never weary of reminding us that there are many mansions in the kingdom of heaven.

On the eve of His Passion, Our Lord told His apostles that their sorrow would be converted into joy. To convert sorrows into joys needs a magic power, but this power is nevertheless at our disposal. In all the annals of hagiography perhaps no saint has succeeded so uniquely in wielding this magic power as Saint Theresa of Lisieux. Her own sufferings are not likely to be ours, so we shall not be called to make the same heroic sacrifices. But the vital part of her message to us is that we should learn to transform tiny sorrows into joys, so that a really big one looming up will find us better disposed to receive God’s strengthening influence. We may not all reach her happy state of immobility in the face of overwhelming sorrows, but we can at least aspire to those intimations of pure joy which come from a courageous attitude towards little ones. For courage will be needed to clothe the tiniest pinprick with a garment of joy; not the courage of the person who is fighting with his back to the wall and hits back instinctively, but a more finely spun courage which gives leisure to feel the full weight of fear and discomfort. The saint was much struck by the praise addressed to Judith: *for thou hast done manfully and thy heart has been strengthened*. She is thinking of an unfelt courage. To a novice who complained of being without courage, she said: “What does it matter if you have no courage, provided you behave as though you really were brave?”⁶ That is what courage really means. We may be dazzled by the fearless hero, but our admiration goes out to the one who has had to fight in overcoming his initial quaking. Perhaps this explains why really brave people are so uncomfortable in the presence of praise. The moments of endurance lose their glamour in the vivid recollection of their initial fears.

⁵ *Letter I to Céline*. The French here is too expressive to translate.

⁶ *Counsels and Reminiscences*.

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If this is true of natural courage, it is equally true of supernatural courage. But the tactics are not quite similar. In each case there may be an initial repugnance to overcome. The natural hero succeeds through sheer grit. But in the supernatural world, the exercise of grit, although necessary, is not wholly dependent on our natural resources. The saint speaks of carrying the cross "feebly," and by this she means a humble recognition of our need for God's help. This quality of grit is not found so often in those amply endowed with physical courage.

St. Theresa drew the inspirational source of her courage from a desire to act purely for God. Her courage became fortified through her intention. Perhaps ours fails so often because we are too intent on what we are giving up instead of gazing steadfastly on the Person for Whom the Sacrifice is being made.

Unfelt courage and unfelt joy would seem to be firmly wedded in St. Theresa's mind. Without aspiring to the dizzy heights of heroicity, we can and should aim at little acts of hidden courage which will convert many of the unpleasantnesses of life into joyful surprises, and incidentally add lustre to our heavenly crowns.

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