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The Task of Happiness: A Reflection of Human Suffering and Christian Joy

“THERE IS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT. WE ALL WANT TO BE HAPPY.” This simple statement of fact, these honest ordinary words, occur in a passage written centuries ago by St. Augustine of Hippo. But so resonant and so fresh are Augustine’s words, they might almost have been written today or yesterday. Augustine himself was well aware of their likely impact. His full statement regarding the task of happiness reads: “There is no doubt about it. We all want to be happy. Everyone will agree with me even before the words are out of my mouth... so let us see if we can find the best way to achieve it.”²

Within the Christian tradition, such an unembarrassed desire for happiness was not something peculiar to St. Augustine. The statement strikes a note or a chord that was, in fact, common in the early Church. In *The Shepherd of Hermas*, for example—one of the most ancient Christian texts—we read: “Cleanse yourself of this evil sadness, and you will live for God; all those will live for God who banish sadness far from them, and are re clothed in joy.”³ Joy—a sharing in the mysterious joy of God himself—is at the very heart of the Gospel message. “All this I tell you,” Jesus said to his disciples, in John 15:11, “so that my joy may be yours, and your joy may be complete.”

Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher, was overheard to remark on one occasion, “Nobody is as happy as a real Christian.” The statement is encouraging certainly, but its validity stands or falls by that small word “real.” For how many of us, in practice, attain the happiness of which Pascal speaks? The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche—no friend to the Christian gospel—but well aware, all the same, of its most important claims, remarked once on the impact of Christ on human history: “His disciples,” he said, “should look more redeemed!”⁴ And, on another occasion, addressing directly those followers of Christ, among his own contemporaries, who appeared to him rather glum and joyless, Nietzsche remarked: “It’s not your arguments that tell against you—it’s your faces!”

Obviously, it would be unwise to avoid the challenge contained in this statement. But that does not mean we must encourage as normative for believers, or make somehow compulsory, a sort of willful, back-slapping heartiness. There are few things, I suspect, more depressing for the human spirit, or more harmful for human relations, than a commandment which insists that all of us turn up at work, or arrive down to the breakfast table, wearing the same bland smiles, the same jolly faces every day! I feel an enormous sympathy, therefore, for a young girl named Rachel, whose letter home from summer camp I read a few years ago. Rachel, a normally robust, nine-year-old American, had survived about a week of camp-life before she wrote home to her parents:

Dear Mom and Dad,
Please come at once and take me home. I can't stand it here. The grown-ups, the leaders, are really strange. They force us kids to be happy all the time. Night and day. It's weird, honestly. They all act like Barney!

Rachel's "holiday camp," with its mad insistence that everyone in the camp should strain to be happy, or at least appear to be happy all the time, sounds not unlike the rather panicky, high-tech, pleasure-driven civilization we all live in today, whether we find ourselves living and working in "the big city" or not. If St. Augustine, from the fourth century, were somehow able to drop in on our Third Millennium, and walk down the thoroughfare of one of our main cities, what would he think of us, I wonder? No doubt he would be stunned by the many advances we have made with the help of modern science and technology. But he also would be struck, I suspect, by the surprising lack of progress we have made, after so many years, in distinguishing between a superficial or illusory happiness and what makes for real joy.

Given St. Augustine's own dramatic history as a young man, and in particular his early addiction to sex, the modern city might well remind him of Carthage, that amazing city in which, he tells us himself, he lived for some time before his conversion. "I went to Carthage," Augustine writes in the *Confessions*, "where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust."⁵ In Carthage, there was pleasure to be sought and had—pleasure in abundance—but there was no true joy. And somehow, gradually, even the pleasure itself that the young Augustine so desperately sought, was piece by piece undermined or whittled away. Augustine himself wrote later: "In my midst of my joy I was caught up in the coils of trouble, for I was lashed with the cruel fiery rods of jealousy and suspicion, fear, anger and quarrels."⁶ It was only, in fact, after Augustine's

conversion some years later that he came fully to understand the nature of happiness and how he might attain it. At that point in his life, he wrote: "There is a world of difference between the joy of hope that comes from faith and the shallow happiness that I was looking for."⁷

Today, we find this "shallow happiness" so painted over and glamorized by the media, in films, magazines, and advertising, it gives the impression of a world of almost magical human fulfillment and self-realization. Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation on Christian joy, *Gaudete in Domino*, notes that "a commercial, hedonistic and materialistic civilization...is still trying to present itself as the gateway to the future."⁸ But, fortunately, many young people today, perhaps because they are the first to feel the side-effects of this false dream—the hurt and the betrayal—also are the first to begin to see through all the tinsel and glamour. For, sooner or later, there is, what Paul VI calls, an "instinctive reaction of many young people against this illusion."⁹ "This generation," the Pope declares—and his words today still retain all their force and authority—"This generation is waiting for something else."¹⁰ It is my own hope this evening—a somewhat ambitious hope, I admit—to try to communicate something of what that *something else* might be.

Towards that end, I propose to give space to a certain number of witnesses to joy. The people I have in mind, and whom I will be quoting, belong, as you will discover, to two very different worlds of experience. In the first part of my talk, attention is focused on the mysterious witness to joy given by certain prisoners on death row, one of whom I knew personally. But, in the second half of my talk, attention is focused exclusively on the witness to joy given by a number of medieval Dominican preachers.



PART 1

A Mysterious Joy

So let me begin, first, by reading to you from a letter written some years ago by a prisoner on death row in South Africa. He was twenty-two-years-old, and his name was Kevin. He wrote this letter—his last letter—shortly before his execution by hanging. Although Kevin was Catholic, and as a child had been an altar boy, later during his teenage years he completely drifted away from God and from the Church, and ended up committing a number of terrible crimes. But, in prison, he was visited by a remarkable

religious sister called Sister Gerda, whom I myself was fortunate some time later to meet. Gerda was a German nun whose own father, many years before, had been held as a prisoner in a concentration camp. Somehow, as the weeks passed, with the help of Gerda, Kevin found himself being drawn back to God.

I read this letter here because it speaks directly to the title of this talk, "The Task of Happiness," and because it is a letter radiant with joy, though obviously composed at a time and within a context of great human suffering. Kevin's letter to Gerda begins:

Yes, my dear Mother in Christ, the hour has eventually come for me to depart from this sinful world. I will die with the name of Jesus on my lips and in his arms. I'll trust and believe until the last moment...It is only Jesus who can help me now. I can't understand. Something is drawing my desire towards the joys of heaven and yet I have to experience death. I want, and I really, really wish to go freely. Nothing stands in my way, not even those I love most; it is because the love of Christ is stronger, firmer, more trustworthy, real and free. I write this letter with tears of joy in my eyes knowing that God is with me. I am indeed more than happy that I have found my God and Saviour again. It is inexplicable. It seems that the moment I start to pray I am directly in touch with God or I feel that I must give my heart just that one jump of desire into eternity. Oh, Sister, I have been so much unloved in my life...but I have at last experienced the love I longed for in the Lord through you...tomorrow I go as a child of God, the lost son returning home, saying for the last time: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I offer you my heart and my soul! Take me as I am!"

Sister Gerda told me later that, at her last meeting with Kevin in prison, "[he] was so transformed and happy that neither he nor his mother could shed a tear on saying good-bye." As the visit came to a close, much to Gerda's astonishment, the joy in Kevin's face remained undimmed. In fact, Gerda told me: "Singing, he parted from us!"

The context in which Kevin composed his letter (on death row with the expectation of certain death the following day) is far removed from the ordinary context in which most of us pursue our everyday Christian lives. But the letter serves to bring into sharp relief, all the same, some of the roads and paths which, sooner or later, all of us must begin to follow if we are to possess that joy, which is not something merely shallow or transitory, but a reality lasting and deep. In my own understanding, the breakthrough into joy is occasioned by three different kinds of experience or forms of practice. And, as it happens, I find all three of them present here in Kevin's letter: 1. The experience of

prayer; 2. The experience of being loved; 3. The experience of suffering.

The Experience of Prayer

It is of great significance, I think, that when he speaks of prayer, Kevin also speaks of desire: "[S]omething is drawing my *desire* towards the joys of heaven...It seems that the moment I start to pray I am directly in touch with God or I feel that I must give my heart just that one jump of *desire* into eternity." Prayer, like nothing else in our lives, brings us down to the root of our desire. We discover, in prayer, new things about God, but also new things about ourselves. And the most notable and the most surprising, perhaps, is the buried strength of our desire, the almost intolerable ache at the core of each one of us—what C.S. Lewis calls, in an astonishing phrase, our "inconsolable secret."

In prayer we begin to realize that God has made our hearts so deep, our love so mysterious, that nothing apart from God will ever *fully* satisfy us or bring us lasting joy. This realization has not only been experienced, it also has been described, by Christian men and women, over the centuries, and often with great vividness. Even St. Thomas Aquinas, a theologian normally noted for his calmness and restraint, exclaims in his treatise, *On the Love of God and Neighbor*: "God...excels every desirable thing...He rejoices the heart...in a more intimate and more lasting manner than all delightful things."¹¹ Of course, in Aquinas' opinion, there are many things which in themselves are good, things which God wants us to enjoy. But, compared to God, St. Thomas points out, "Other things afford us pleasure in a superficial manner, as if exteriorly, but God delights us intimately, and therefore profoundly."¹² Aquinas then goes on to conclude, and the statement is memorable: "God alone substantially penetrates the very substance of the soul, and consequently rejoices the marrow of our bones."¹³

Today, we find ourselves surrounded on all sides by people of different religions or none, speaking to us about spirituality, or about the search for meaning. But how seldom we read or hear anything about God that approaches the stark simplicity and passion of Aquinas' statement. Why this is so, is not at all easy to explain. But I would like to consider at least one factor in the situation. Since the early 20th century and the advent of Modern Depth Psychology, it has been commonplace to speak about the repression of sexual desire. But, perhaps, there is today a more fundamental repression at work in our society, and not only in what we call "secular society," but also—and strange to say—in some of the new groups and quasi-religious movements which have emerged recently and

whose members take an active interest in spirituality. For that interest almost never seems to extend to an admission of the true depth of our desire for God—or indeed of God's desire for us—as if such an admission in itself would somehow subvert the control we want to exercise over both our secular and our spiritual lives.

But, with the grace of prayer, and the humility and strength which that grace brings, we find courage to go down to the root of our desire. We begin to trust and to surrender all that we have and all that we are to God. And, in doing so, in surrendering to the Mystery, we begin at last to experience in faith something of that passion of joy, that great delight in knowing God, of which Aquinas speaks.

The Experience of Being Loved

To me, one of the most striking phrases in Kevin's letter is the following: "I have been so much unloved in my life...but I have at last experienced the love I longed for in the Lord through you." It may be that none of us here ever suffered the torment or the kind of rejection which Kevin endured as a young child, or as a boy growing up. But all of us can understand, at once, the profound breakthrough into joy Kevin experienced in prison when, at last, someone loved him with respect, loved him for himself, and loved him in spite of his crimes. In my own life, one of the most impressive witnesses to that kind of joy, was a young, black, twenty-three-year-old man, also on death row in the same maximum-security prison in Pretoria where Kevin died. His name was Christopher Andrews. The day before his execution by hanging, Christopher wrote me a letter. It was the eve of his twenty-fourth birthday. I received the letter, in Ireland, about two weeks later. Here is a short extract:

God knows my feelings right at this moment as I am writing this letter. But surely I can tell you that I feel as I've never felt in my life, and the happiness to know that my reunion with Him—with God—will be glorious, fills my moments of life with joy and gladness. Well, I wish you all the good in the world, and may you always think of me as you did in the past, because to know that you did was a great consolation to me. And may you go from one luck to the other luck all your life. Let the Gospel you preach bring blessing to those who listen, and may God lead you from one truth to the other. I hereby bid you goodbye, my brother...May the Lord go with you wherever your journey takes you. Farewell, my friend, I loved you as myself, and I am glad. Your friend eternally, Christopher.

I am glad. The strength of love and the joy Christopher possessed in the face of death indicate something much greater than the blessing of an ordinary human friendship. Although, from the beginning there was, of course, contact in the ordinary way (with the visits to the prison, the exchange of news, and the conversation), what Christopher was responding to—what he was receiving—was nothing less than the blessing, the unexpected blessing, of Christ's love, of Christ's friendship. Human regard or affectionate—the attempt to give attention to someone else in need—has of course its importance. But the real privilege on these occasions is the opportunity somehow to be or to become the instrument of a love much greater than any that we ourselves possess. What Kevin longed for in the end, for example, although it was human love certainly, was also something more—*something else*. It was the knowledge of being loved finally by Christ, his Lord. In his last letter to Gerda, he wrote: "Oh, sister, I have been so much unloved in my life...but I have, at last, received the love I longed for in the Lord through you."

The Experience of Suffering

The third road to joy is, by far, the most unexpected of all, the path that is most paradoxical. For, here, joy is attained by what is, apparently, its very opposite, namely, by the experience of suffering. But how, since it is so often destructive of human happiness, can suffering bring joy? In the Gospel, Jesus links these two words, these two realities, together in an astonishing way: "Happy [or blessed] are you," he says, when people hate you, and when they exclude and insult you...Rejoice and leap for joy on that day!" Luke 6:21-23. The first thing to note here is the central place given to happiness in Jesus' teaching. Of all the doctors of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas was, perhaps, the most aware of this fact. Thomas notes, for example, that in the Sermon on the Mount and in the Beatitudes, Jesus draws our attention not only to "the various precepts of the law," but also to the fact—the wondrous, saving fact—that our lives in this world, and in the next, are ordered towards happiness.¹⁴ The Beatitudes represent, in fact, nothing less than God's answer to our human search for happiness.

And the Beatitudes are addressed—all of them—to people who have taken the risk of loving others or of loving God. For immediately we decide to love someone—not just to fall in love, but to *stand* in love—we at once become vulnerable in all kinds of ways, and not least to the pain of loss that we will experience if that person abandons us, for example, or if he or she dies. "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Matthew 5:4. I have entitled this third road to joy "the experience of

suffering," but it could, perhaps, more accurately be called "the experience of loving." For real love, although it gives us a sense of happiness like nothing else in the world, also brings with it a new mysterious sorrow. We become aware, and with a vividness not perhaps experienced elsewhere, of something of our own, and the other person's most pressing need and vulnerability. And, here, as in all our close relationships, it is necessary, as Mother Teresa says, "to love until it hurts."

Love demands two things: surrender and self-sacrifice. This truth is something that the world—the materialistic world, at any rate—never seems to understand. But it is something that every lover knows by instinct. Nobody understands lovers except themselves. Nobody understands their willingness to completely forget themselves, throwing to the winds their own selfish interests. And nobody understands their joy. In the context of the Christian life, it is only the man or the woman who has "abandoned self and completely gone forth from self," as Eckhart puts it, "for whom nothing could be a cross or pain or suffering: it would all be a joy."¹⁵

The self-sacrifice involved in going out from oneself does not always come easy, even to the lover. There may be a certain impulse or instinct towards self-sacrifice, and that is wonderful. But instinct is not enough. The journey towards a great relationship presupposes a profound gift of grace—that first of all—but also a lot of hard work. One vivid illustration of this journey from self-centeredness to self-forgetfulness comes from the ancient Persian tradition. It is the story of a rather egotistical young man who falls in love with a beautiful woman. They get to know one another, and one day he decides to ask her to marry him. He goes to her door and knocks. "Who is it?" a voice replies. "It's me," he says, confidently. But the voice within says: "I'm sorry. I don't know you." The young man is deeply upset at these words and goes away puzzled. The next day he returns, knocks on the door again, still feeling pretty confident. "Who is it?" the voice answers. "It's me!" he shouts, this time, emphasizing the *me*. "I'm sorry. I don't know you." This reply completely bewilders the young man. He goes away and stays away for weeks. In fact, he goes alone out into a desert where, night and day, he fasts and prays. Then, he returns to the door of the woman he loves. He knocks on the door. The voice from within replies: "Who is it?" This time, pressing his face up very close to the door, he whispers quietly, "It's *you*." And the door opens!

What the young man discovered, through his own experience of suffering, is that the door of life, the door of joy, never opens if it is approached merely in a selfish spirit. Like every man—like every human being—he is naturally drawn to seek pleasure and

to possess the thing that he desires. But what he discovered in the desert is that the hidden desire, the *deepest* desire in his heart, is not to seize joy for himself, but rather to give joy and to give pleasure to the one he loves. And so the journey he has made is, we can say, a journey from a place of selfishness "It's me"—to a place of self-forgetfulness and communion, "It's you!"

Suffering—the experience of abandonment, for example, or of rejection—can, of course, be destructive and heart-breaking—*is* destructive and heart-breaking. But it also can break open, like almost nothing else, the shell of our ego. Suffering is a teacher like no other, and it is a hard teacher. In a sense, none of us really want to be in this particular school. But we are all here anyway. And our hope is—and not only our hope, but our *experience* is—that God in time can use this lesson we are learning to liberate us from our bondage to false dreams and selfish plans and initiate us into an awareness of reality.

Victor Frankl, in one of his books, tells the story of a fellow-prisoner he came to know just days before her death in a concentration camp.

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard," she told me. "In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously." Pointing through the window of her hut, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness." Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree," she said to me. I was startled and didn't quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes." What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me, 'I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life'"¹⁶

This young woman, Frankl notes, was "cheerful"—an astonishing adjective in this context! But on what exactly was her joy founded? On two things, I suggest: first, on a new knowledge of herself, something which for years, by her own admission, had been dormant; and, second, on a new and vivid sense of the sacred, an awareness, as she approached her death, of the immanent presence of God.

The story of this woman is so powerful it would be fitting, in a way, if we had a period of silence in order to take it in. But time moves on. And I want to turn my attention now

from the witness given by men and women in prison—some of them our near-contemporaries—to a witness of Gospel joy that comes from another world entirely, the medieval world, in fact, of St. Dominic and St. Thomas Aquinas.



PART 2

Dominicans and Gospel Joy

Involvement in religion, or in the pursuit of a spiritual life, is such a serious matter, believers in all religions have a tendency to become very grim, solemn people. And Christianity is no exception. Laughter and happiness can come to be regarded as somehow frivolous and even as subversive of an authentic moral and spiritual way of life. "Sometimes people, even Catholics," the Dominican, Fr. Vincent McNabb writes, "are frightened away from the spiritual life. They think it aims at making us miserable."¹⁷ But McNabb himself, when, as a young man he entered the Dominican Order, began immediately to breathe in an atmosphere that was altogether different. "I was immensely surprised and delighted," he tells us, "to find that sadness was never considered one of the products of the religious life...if you hadn't joy, out you went!"¹⁸

Of all the early Dominican preachers, perhaps the most spontaneously good-humored and exuberant, was Blessed Jordan of Saxony, Dominic's first successor as Master. Almost an entire section of the *Vitae Fratrum* devoted to a number of his witty replies.¹⁹ Everyone we're told, longed to hear him. And he attracted an enormous number of vocations to the Order. Once, in 1229, when he was on his way to Genoa, bringing with him a batch of new Dominicans, one of the group, during night prayer or Compline, started laughing, and then all the rest joined in "right merrily."²⁰ A senior brother reprimanded them at once, and by using signs, ordered them to stop. But this "only set them off laughing more than ever." As soon as Compline was over, Jordan turned to the friar in question and said:

"Brother, who made you their master? What right have you to take them to task?" Then, addressing the other brothers, Jordan said: "Laugh to your hearts' content...and don't stop on that man's account. You have my full leave, and it is only right that you should laugh after breaking from the devil's thralldom...Laugh on, then, and be as merry as you please."²¹

This little episode from the *Vitae Fratrum* might seem naive and inconsequential. But it serves to underline something really fundamental about the early Dominicans and their fresh grasp of the Gospel. Throughout the preaching ministry of Dominic, a vision of Gospel joy had come to define itself over against some very grim and very gloomy notions indeed. So Jordan of Saxony's instinctive refusal here to silence the brothers' laughter was, very probably, I would say, no accident.

The Joy of Dominic

In a striking prayer attributed to Dominic, the saint asks God directly and without the least hesitation for "delight and enjoyment," both for himself and for his brethren.²² But what Dominic aspires to in this prayer is not some kind of willful heartiness but, rather, as he explains, "delight and enjoyment in putting the Beatitudes into practice"—an evangelical joy, in other words, a happiness so deeply grounded in supernatural faith and hope that even "in the most profound poverty, in bitter grief, in severe persecution, in great hunger and thirst for righteousness, in all the cares and worries of mercy," even in these circumstances, each individual brother would, in St. Dominic's words, "consider himself blessed."²³

Of Dominic himself it is said that he preached the Word not only by word and by example, but also by joy. "[H]is face was always radiant," we're told, and "By his cheerfulness he easily won the love of everybody. Without difficulty he found his way into peoples' hearts as soon as they saw him."²⁴ In parenthesis, I should note here that there exists, of course, a kind of false kind of hilarity, a sort of insistent joking or teasing, which sometimes is little more than a cowardly way of avoiding one's own guilt or fear by mocking the weaknesses and disabilities of others. Nevertheless, the fact remains that laughter can also build up, encourage and set free. For those who are "pure of heart," as Josef Pieper reminds us, can laugh in a freedom that creates freedom in others.²⁵

Happily, then, we don't have to agree with the rather grim conclusion, expressed in an article I read a short time ago, entitled, "Get Serious! The Monastic Condemnation of Laughter." In this article, the author writes: "At the best of times, laughter is a movement toward the surface, toward the shallows. It is always escapist. It is always a distraction because it is always a movement away from the quiet centre of one's being."²⁶ Now that statement, in spite of possessing the dubious merit of sounding very "spiritual," is not, I would suggest, very wise. The deep, almost uncontrollable laughter which springs from gospel joy, far from being something that is unspiritual or shallow or escapist is, in fact,

simply an ecstasy of the inner heart, a saving "movement" away from the preciousness of cold self-love, an impulse of surrender and delight towards the neighbor and towards God.

In one of the early texts concerning Dominic, a great burst of laughter is recorded. What provoked the laughter was an unusual miracle he worked in the Church of St. Sixtus. All the Dominicans who were present, both the brethren and the sisters, at once burst out laughing (*"subridentibus fratribus et sororibus"*).²⁷ Although many saints over the centuries have worked miracles that have moved crowds of people to wonder and amazement, in all of Christian hagiography, I have never heard of a miracle that provoked immediate and joyous laughter among those present. Blessed Cecilia, in her *Legenda*, refers to it as *"iocundum miraculum,"* "a laughter-stirring miracle."²⁸

Not everyone understood the exuberant joy of the early Dominicans preachers. Mechtild of Magdeburg, a medieval contemplative, for example, admits that up to a certain stage in her life she had considered laughing not only frivolous but "wrong."²⁹ What changed Mechtild's mind on the subject was a vision she received once on the feast of St. Dominic. The Lord appeared to her and said something concerning laughter that she never forgot. "Whenever Dominic laughed," she was told, "he did so with the true delight of the Holy Spirit."³⁰

Aquinas and Good Humor

But what about St. Thomas Aquinas? We might be inclined to think that although Thomas was a son of St. Dominic, he was far too serious a theologian to devote his attention to the question of happiness or good humor. But nothing could be further from the truth. In his commentary on Psalm 34, for example, he speaks of a joy which is nothing less than "an expansion of the heart" (*"latitudinem cordis"*), a joy so full "it breaks forth externally from within."³¹ And, in the *Summa*, Thomas defends what he calls "affability" and "cheerfulness"—quite openly disagreeing with the view that austerity must always exclude "cheerfulness" or must forbid "the giving and receiving of the pleasures of conversation."³² What is more, Thomas takes to task those people who are so serious about themselves that they never say anything ridiculous (*"nee ipsi dicunt aliquid ridiculum"*), but instead are always trying to obstruct the fun or the amusement of others.³³ Such people are not only "rough" and "boorish," in Thomas' opinion, they also are morally unsound. "Bear yourself with wit," he advises—echoing Seneca—"lest you be regarded as sour or despised as dull."³⁴

Of course St. Thomas is well aware that even laughter and playfulness can, on occasion, be excessive and inappropriate. He would probably agree, for example, with Goethe's telling statement on the subject: "Every century tries to make the sacred vulgar, the difficult easy, the serious hilarious—which really would not be objectionable at all if only earnestness and fun were not both destroyed in the process."³⁵ In spite of this danger, however, St. Thomas, in the *Summa*, is prepared openly to defend the playfulness and wit of professional actors and comedians, remarking, for example, how "it was revealed to the Blessed Paphnutius that a certain jester (*ioculator*) would be with him in the life to come!"³⁶

"Play," in St. Thomas' opinion, "is necessary for the intercourse of human life."³⁷ He even states, at one point, that an unrelenting seriousness indicates a lack of virtue since "it wholly despises play, which is as necessary for human life as rest is."³⁸ Nimbleness of wit, therefore, or playfulness, can lay claim to be an authentic virtue. Aristotle calls it "*eutrapelia*." And the person who possesses it, in Thomas' own words, "has a happy turn of mind, whereby he gives his words and deeds a cheerful turn."³⁹

But is there evidence anywhere in Thomas' life of "a happy turn of mind"? Remigio, one of Thomas' students in Paris, reports that Thomas made a humorous allusion in class once to the extravagant liturgical celebrations that had been held for the feast of St. Martin in contrast to more modest celebrations for the feast of St. Peter.⁴⁰ The local people ("*rustici*") had, it seems, attributed to Martin's intercession the amazingly abundant harvest of that year. But St. Peter's contribution to the harvest was not noted. So, it would seem that, by the common consent of the faithful, St. Peter's feast that year was, by comparison with St. Martin's, somewhat down-graded!

Apart from this one story, have we any other evidence of Aquinas' sense of humour? The Dominican Father Torrell, in his superb, two-volumed work on Aquinas, states that, although "we have no indication of the frequency of such sallies, what we know from other sources about the vivacity of Thomas' reactions inclines us to think that they were not rare."⁴¹ I agree with this suggestion. But I am inclined to think, nevertheless, that far more important than the existence of actual "jokes" told by Aquinas, is the presence in his work of what we might call a certain pervasive attitude. "Humour," as Ludwig Wittgenstein once shrewdly observed, "is not a mood but a way of looking at the world."⁴² That being said, however, I hope it will not seem forced or willful if I draw attention here to a passage from Aquinas that I have never seen quoted, but that I

suspect would almost certainly have brought a smile to the lips of his students when they first read it.

The passage occurs in Thomas' commentary on the fourth book of Aristotle's *Ethics*. Thomas is reflecting at one point on beauty, and in particular on that beauty which can be found "in a large body." Now we all know—and from a number of sources—that Brother Thomas was not slim. "*Grossus et brunus*" are two of the adjectives used to describe him.⁴³ And Remigio, his student in Paris, doesn't hesitate to speak of his famous master as a very fat man indeed—"*pinguissimus!*"⁴⁴ Thomas, in his commentary on the *Ethics*, is generous enough, echoing "the philosopher" to suggest that "those who are small might be called pretty (*formosi*) because of an appropriateness of colour and a fitting proportion of limbs." However, he goes on at once to add, "they cannot be called beautiful because of a lack of magnitude."⁴⁵

It is almost certain that Thomas never delivered this commentary on Aristotle in a public, university forum. But, according to V.J. Bourke, the commentary may have been shared in private by Thomas with some of his own brethren, "quite possibly as a lecture course for young students in the Roman Province of the Order of Preachers."⁴⁶ If he did so, one can have no difficulty imagining the students' reaction, when, standing foursquare in front of them, Master Thomas—with conscious or unconscious irony—placidly declared: "*pulcritudo proprie consistit in corpore magno*": "Beauty is found in a large body!"⁴⁷

So Thomas, like the great Augustine, refuses to have the question of happiness set aside. For both men, morality itself begins with happiness and is a search for happiness, a fact indicated by the passage from Augustine I quoted at the very beginning. You remember his words: "There is no doubt about it. We all want to be happy. Everyone will agree with me even before the words are out of my mouth...so let us see if we can find the best way to achieve it." Unfortunately, very seldom if ever, in the manual theologies of later centuries, do we find such a frank and honest admission of our human thirst for happiness. And—inevitably—given that sad exclusion or that "repression," the result is that the human heart begins to look elsewhere for its fulfillment.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, a great number of our contemporaries found themselves attracted to a philosophy of happiness, whose most popular exponent was the American anthropologist Joseph Campbell. At the core of Campbell's philosophy there is

one single imperative which, at first hearing, might seem to echo the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas. But a closer reading or a more attentive listening reveals a very different story. For with his famous catchword, "Follow your bliss," Campbell is inviting us to pursue happiness by focusing exclusively on the self. Little or no concern is shown for the feelings of others, and there is no manifest interest in anyone else's happiness. Thus, the people in one's life, one's friends, one's family, one's neighbors, are reduced to mere "functions" for one's own self-development, "instruments," according to Campbell, of one's own "destiny."⁴⁸ "Go where your body and soul want to go," he declares. "When you have the feeling, then stay with it, and don't let anyone throw you off."⁴⁹ Although I find myself deeply opposed to this doctrine of "me-ism," I cannot but respect the desperate thirst for happiness that still draws people today to this kind of teaching, a thirst or a need within the human heart, which contemplatives like Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, never for a moment allowed themselves to forget.

These great preachers of the Gospel, who, to their contemporaries, appeared so completely radiant, discovered in their own search for happiness—something unexpected about its attainment. And it must have struck them with the surprise and force of a Gospel paradox. For "the secret" they uncovered was, in a sense, not to pursue happiness at all, at least not for themselves alone. But, instead, by learning step by step to give their attention to God and to their neighbor, and by seeking, wherever possible, to bring fullness of life and joy to others, happiness—and very great happiness indeed—came to them in abundance.



Conclusion

In this short paper on human happiness, in search of wisdom, and in search of witnesses to joy, we have found ourselves in some very remarkable company indeed, with St. Augustine of Hippo, for example, in North Africa, with prisoners on death row in Pretoria, with a woman dying in a concentration camp in Germany, in a religious house and university of the 13th century with St. Thomas Aquinas, and with Blessed Jordan of Saxony and St. Dominic on the road preaching.

One thread common to all, or almost all, these witnesses has been the amazing trust they placed in the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament concerning happiness.

Attending to their stories and listening to their words, it is as if, for an hour, we have been somehow led, in their company, up to the top of the Mountain of the Beatitudes, and with them have been able to hear again something of Jesus' own remarkable teaching about joy. Of course, much, much more would need to be said about the task of happiness or about Gospel joy, about that "something else" which the world cannot give. But I must end here. And, to finish, I will now read, if I may, the words—the last words, in fact—concerning human suffering and Christian joy that Jesus spoke to his closest friends and disciples:

You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy...So you have trouble now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you...I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16:20, 22, 33.)

¹ Delivered at the University of St. Thomas, Saint Paul, Minnesota as part of the Joseph and Edith Habiger Lecture in Catholic Studies, March 27, 2001.

² St. Augustine, *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae*, I, iii, 4, in *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 1 (Paris 1887) p. 1312. Cited in *Servais Pinckaers, The Pursuit of Happiness*, New York 1998, p.vii

³ *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Mandate X, iii, 4. See *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed., J.R Harmer (London 1891) p. 334.

⁴ Cited in Paul Tillich, *The Boundaries of our Being* (London 1973) p. 256.

⁵ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. III, trans., R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth 1968) p. 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* BK. VI, p.119

⁸ Paul VI, *On Christian Joy, Apostolic Exhortation 'Gaudete in Domino'*, in *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI* (Rome 1975) p. 499.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *De Dilectione Dei Et Proximi* IV, in *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 28 (Paris 1889) p.331

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, I, II, q.108, a.3

¹⁵ "The Book of Divine Comfort" in *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, Vol. III, ed. M.O'C. Walshe (Longmeade 1987) p. 89.

¹⁶ Victor Franke, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York 1963) pp. 109-110.

¹⁷ McNabb, *The Craft of Suffering* (London 1936) p. 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.38

¹⁹ *Lives of the Brethren*, trans., Placid Conway (London 1955) pp. 121-29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.127

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127. Striking in itself, Jordan's defense of the brothers' laughter is all the more striking when one remembers that, in line with the general monastic tradition, such rowdy behavior in choir and elsewhere was characterized in the *Primitive Constitutions of the Friars Preachers* as a fault, albeit as one of the minor faults. (Dist. I., XXI).

²² *The Nine Ways of Prayer in Early Dominicans*, p. 99.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

²⁴ Jordan of Saxony, *Libellus De Principiis Ord. Praed.* In M.F.P., Vol XLV no. 104, p. 75.

²⁵ Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart*, trans., P.C. Duggan (San Francisco 1991) p.

44.

²⁶ Kenneth C. Russell, *Get Serious! The Monastic Condemnation of Laughter*, Review for Religious, May-June 1993, p. 376. This one negative statement apart, Russell's paper makes interesting reading.

²⁷ BI. Cecilia, *Miracula*, 10. See A.F.P. Vol XXXVII, 1967, p.37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38. See also "The Legend of St. Dominic by BI. Cecilia" in *The Lives of the Brethren*, p. 86.

²⁹ *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans., Frank Tobin (New York 1998) p. 165. Mechtild (c. 1207-c. 1282) was for many years closely associated with Dominicans, but she ended her life as a Cistercian in the monastery of Helfta.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³¹ *Postilla Super Psalmos*, 34, in *Opera Omnia XIV* (Parma 1863) p. 276.

³² *Summa Theologiae* 11.11 q. 168 a.4, obj. 3 and ad. 3.

³³ *Summa Theologiae*, 11.11 q. 168 a.4..

³⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, 11.11 q. 168 a.4. Thomas Gilby's translation. See vol. 44, *English Translation of the Summa Theologiae* (Cambridge 1972) pp. 225 and 227.

³⁵ Cited by Josef Pieper in *Über die Liebe. See Josef Pieper: An Anthology* (San Francisco 1984) p. 42.

³⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, 11.11 q.168 obi. 3 and ad.

³⁷ *Summa Theologiae* 11.11 q.168 a.3 ad. 3.

³⁸ *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, IV 16, 1128 b 2, (Roma 1969) p. 258.

³⁹ 11.11 q.168 a.2.

⁴⁰ See Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Initiation a Saint Thomas dAquin* (Paris 1993) p. 411.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁴² Wittgenstein made this observation while staying at Rosro in Ireland. See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London 1991) p. 529.

⁴³ *Nicolas de Piperno: Naples 19*. See Torrell, p. 407

⁴⁴ Torrell, p. 407.

⁴⁵ *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, IV, 8, 1123 b 5 (Roma 1969) pp. 226-27.

⁴⁶ See Bourke, "The Nicomachean Ethics and Thomas Aquinas" in *St. Thomas Aquinas: Commemorative Studies* (Toronto 1974) p. 250. See also p. 248.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, IV 8, 1123 b 5. G.K. Chesterton, in his book *St. Thomas Aquinas*, writes: "His bulk made it easy to regard him humorously...It may be that he, and not some irritated partisan...was responsible for the sublime exaggeration that a crescent was cut out of the dinner-table to allow him to sit down!" (London 1933) p. 97.

⁴⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York) p. 91 and p. 118.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.