

The Command for Joy

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Christ Jesus himself says to us, "I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete" (Jn 15:11). This teaching of the Master is easily acceptable and believable for us, for each of us wants to be happy and joyful, and we want to know how to arrive at this destination. The roadmap to the city of joy is quite simple, really. Jesus describes for us the roads on which we are to tread: "Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love" (Jn 15:9-10). Again, this seems easy enough to do, until we truly reflect on what he means when he says, "just as I have kept my Father's commandments."

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, is the perfect model for us to follow in obeying the commands of the Father.

We know that, "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..." (Heb 5:8-9). Jesus was made perfect through his obedience to the will of the Father.

When he speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus says, "This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father" (Jn 10:17-18). Jesus, because "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, [and because] he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross," in full obedience to the

commands of the Father was made perfect (Phil 2:7-8). Through his obedience, he experienced joy, the very same joy that he wishes each of us to experience with him. He even tells us how to experience this joy: by following his commands, just as he followed the Father's commands.

Conditions for discipleship

The one who obeys the commands of Jesus is his disciple and learns from him. The conditions for the disciples of Jesus are strict, indeed, and without confusion or compromise. "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). This command - to take up our cross each day - is, as it were, a summary of the conditions for Christian discipleship, and leads us to the complete joy that is the joy of Jesus; this St. Francis of Assisi knew well.

St. Francis so greatly desired and longed to carry not just his own cross, but the cross of Christ as well, that he prayed:

My Lord Jesus Christ, I pray you to grant me two graces before I die: the first is that during my life I may feel in my soul and in my body, as much as possible, that pain which You, dear Jesus, sustained in the hour of Your most bitter passion. The second is that I may feel in my heart,

as much as possible, that excessive love with which You, O Son of God, were inflamed in willingly enduring such suffering for us sinners.

Francis prayed this prayer on Mount La Verna, just before he received the stigmata. So great was his desire to share so intimately in the cross of Christ that the very marks of the crucifixion were given to him, as was the great depth of love with which Jesus willingly walked the *Via Dolorosa*. The pure union which Francis sought with Christ was given to him because of his deep faith and trust.

Transfiguration

Brother Tomaso de Celano, Francis' first official biographer, describes for us this powerful moment on the mountain. Francis saw a man who looked like a seraph, whose hands were stretched out and whose feet were held together in the way of a man nailed to a cross. Celano tells us that Francis "was inflamed with joy by the loving sweetness of the Seraph's glance, which was immeasurably beautiful, yet he was terrified by the consideration of that cross to which he was nailed and the bitterness of his passion. He got up feeling sad yet happy at the same time, if this is what we can call it, and joy and sorrow were intermingled in him.

This, then, is a portion of the great

paradox of the cross: one encounters the cross with both trepidation and with eagerness, with sorrow and with joy. We approach with fear knowing that we, too, must embrace the cross in our lives, and we approach with eagerness because we desire to follow Christ unreservedly. We approach with sorrow for the Passion which Christ endured for our sake, and with joy for the hope of the Resurrection and the life of the world to come.

Francis, talking one day with Brother Leo, commanded him to write down a story in which Francis described perfect joy. He begins, saying, "A messenger comes [to Francis] and says that all the masters in Paris have come into the Order; write: this is not true joy." If all of the great masters and teachers at the famed university in Paris donned the brown habit, true joy is not found here. So often we look for joy in the company of great and learned individuals; surely their years of study and debate could lead us to joy, we might presume. Francis tells us otherwise. Joy is not found in the knowledge of the things of the world.

He continues, "Or that all the prelates beyond the mountains [have entered the Order], as well as the archbishops and bishops; or, that the king of France and the king of England [have entered the Order]; write: this is not true joy." If the prelates of the Church and the monarchs of the countries came into the Order, the Order would receive untold temporal and physical wealth and power. Even with the enormous good that could be worked with such possessions, true joy is not found here, either.

He adds, "Again, that my brothers have gone to the nonbelievers and converted all of them to the faith; again, that I have so much grace from God that I could heal the sick and perform many miracles: I tell you that true joy does not consist in any of these things." Francis dreamed of the conversion of the world to Christ; he even attempted to convert the sultan himself! But even in this worthy and admirable goal – indeed, a command of Christ – perfect joy is not found. His command to pick up our cross, in a sense, outweighs the command of evangelization, for the spreading of the Gospel naturally comes forth from the carrying of the cross. Within his own lifetime, Francis was loved for the miracles he worked, but true joy he did not find in these signs of the love of God and of his presence in the lives of his people. Perfect joy is not found in the great deeds or the good works we accomplish.

Perfect Joy, moment of grace

Brother Leo must, at this point, have been quite curious – and confused – as to what true joy actual does consist of, for he questions Francis,

"What then is true joy?" There may even be a bit of impatience in his question. Is this not the very same question that each of us longs to ask from the depths of our hearts and the very same question we wish to have answered?

Now Francis begins a new story to answer Brother Leo's question. Francis explains: "I return from Perugia," he says, "and arrive here in the dead of night; and it is winter time, muddy and so cold that icicles have formed on the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs, and blood flows from such wounds. And covered with mud and

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cold, I come to the gate and after I have knocked and called for some time, a brother comes and asks: 'Who are you?' I answer: 'Brother Francis.' And he says: 'Go away; this is not the proper hour for going about; you may not come in.'"

Francis describes what seems to us a horrible and unimaginable scene for this holy man of God to be involved in. He is beaten and tortured by nature; he has lost the fight against the cold. He must have fallen down several times for the snow to form icicles on his garment so as to strike his legs and bloody them and to be covered in mud; he has lost the

fight against the brambles and the brush. Finally, destitute and in great pain, he arrives at what should have been a great haven in this winter night, a place to refresh his tired body and heal his wounds. He arrives at the place where his very friars are staying; surely he could find refuge here. He knocks on the door and is not answered; he has been ignored, cast off as one of those unimportant beggars so common in his day, one of the very ones he worked so tirelessly to serve. Finally, a brother comes to the door at long last

and does not even recognize his Father Francis, nor is the word of Francis believed. Certain this beaten man does not belong here, the brother tells Francis to leave because it is too late in the day for the botherings of such things. Surely the brother had the safety of the friars in mind when he turned away his Father.

As if this were not enough, Francis continues, "And when I insist, he answers: 'Go away, you are a simple and a stupid person; we are so many and we have no need of you. You are certainly not coming to us at this hour!' Francis' request is denied a second time. This time,

however, Francis is not simply turned away and refused entry; he is insulted and degraded. The porter assumes Francis a man incapable, or perhaps too lazy, to work to support himself and believes he has come to join the Order only to survive and to live an easier life than the one he currently lives. The Order is not interested in such sorts.

Just when Brother Leo must have thought the story could not get any worse, Francis concluded, saying, "And I stand again at the door and say: 'For the love of God, take me in tonight.' And he answers: 'I will not. Go to the Croziers' place and ask there.'" Francis begs in the name of God, in whose name he certainly should have been welcomed in and cared for, and still he is refused. This final time, the brother not only refuses him entry, but he even sends him away; he rejects Francis forthright.

Where is Francis going with this story? Why he is telling this bizarre and unthinkable tale? No one would even do such things to this beloved man, but now Francis gets to the heart and message of his story: "I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, there would be true joy in this and true virtue and the salvation of the soul."

What Francis calls perfect joy is so striking, so peculiar, and so foreign that it could take a lifetime to truly understand all of the truth behind his words; at its root, though,

what Francis relates is nothing more than a complete sharing in the cross of Christ. The cross is free for the embracing.

Throughout the course of his parable, Francis is beaten, bloodied, ignored, insulted, and utterly rejected; he is patient and does not complain or condemn; and yet, perfect joy is found here and not in the knowledgeable men, the prelates, the kings, or in miracles. Surely Francis is insane; or so we might be tempted to think. Francis, though, is not insane; rather, he is foolish—in our estimation—but there is nothing wrong in being a fool, for, "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom" (1 Cor 1:25).

We have seen this story before and we know it well. Jesus was beaten. Jesus was bloodied. Jesus was ignored, insulted, and rejected. He was patient and "opened not his mouth" (Is 53:7). Francis is able to find true joy here because it is precisely here that he most fully follows the commands of Christ and carries not just his own cross, but the very cross of Christ as well. Francis so closely follows the commands of the Lord that he shares not just in the emotional sufferings of the Passion, but in the physical sufferings as well.

Our experience with joy

Today we search for joy in the seemingly obvious and easy places to find this mirth our hearts desire.

We seek to draw the fullness of pleasure from movies and television; video games and toys—it matters not the size of the toy; books and knowledge; friendships; possessions and wealth and power; the list could go on and on. We hurry down all of the roads marked by the signs toward joy; pushing others out of our way as we go, and yet, no matter how far down these roads we travel we do not arrive at the completeness of joy we go in search of. We like to think that we have to go far away to find joy, but really we do not even have to put our feet on the road at all; we can find it right at home, in the most unlikely of places.

To experience the joy of Christ Jesus, it is necessary to experience, in one way or another, the sufferings of him who died for us, both the emotional sufferings and the physical. We must desire to know both the pain he endured as well as his "excessive love." Once we have shared in this aspect of the Paschal Mystery, we are able to share in, through the grace of God, the joy of the Resurrection.

Even as St. Francis experienced perfect joy in his complete sharing in the cross, so can we experience that joy which Christ desires to share with us. The cross is present in our lives

each and every day. Sometimes it looms immediately in front of us, from the moment we open our eyes to the moment we finally retire from the day. At other times the cross seems hidden from sight, whether by our own design or no, but still it is present, waiting for us to embrace it, to place it on our shoulders, and to journey down the road with the Crucified One. If only we are willing to humble ourselves, confess our sins, carry our cross as did our Teacher and Guide, and depend on the Lord God alone, true joy can be ours. Indeed, true joy should be ours, for Christ desires to share it with us: "I have come that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete." The King of kings and the Lord of lords has opened the roadmap before us. When we consciously and willingly accept the sufferings that come to us and carry our cross with patience as the Lord has commanded, then we may come to know the joy that our Lord and our God wishes to share with us in both this world and in the world to come.

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He who knows not his origin, knows not his destination
-Philippine proverb