

MORE THAN HONEY TO MY MOUTH

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IT IS DUE to the great contribution of Gilbert Chesterton to English literature that our minds have been opened of recent years to the wonder of this universe. He wondered at everything. Trees, rocks, and more especially, people, were subject to his stare, his admiration, and his paradox. When he did not see something glorious about them, he stood on his head and described the world from that position. But no matter from what position he looked, he saw, at least in his earlier days, a great optimism running out of things; an optimism that flooded into his heart and back out again in great rivers of poetry, prose, and argument.

Yet Chesterton himself, coming to the end of his life, had a more difficult time with his optimism. Men were less and less majestic; the great progress of humanity and humanism which, in his youth, formed his credo, seemed to be faltering. Things were rising in Germany; and there was trouble in the world. The nimbus of gold-colored light around the heads of men seemed somewhat to diminish; horns were appearing instead. He died on the eve of the cataclysm.

The generation which follows him already has difficulty in seeing the poetry of the world. We see evil. We see war and the wreckage of war; we see the wreckage of peace. We cannot concentrate on the marvelous reflection of God in nature when we see all about us a denial of His image in men. Our reaction, therefore, is not of joy or optimism. We are not idiots. But because some of us are not atheists, our reaction is not one of despair. It is the purpose of this paper to determine the lines along which our thought must run to find how, in the face of such universal evil, a Catholic may retain his sanity, his emotional stability, and his Faith.

Strangely enough, we are going to speak about joy.

Now twenty-three hundred years ago a man wrote a book on ethics. Since he thought joy was an important part of his subject, he saved it for the end, and began his last chapter with these words:

After the preceding matters, we ought perhaps next to discuss pleasure. For it is thought to be most intimately connected with our human nature, which is the reason why, in educating the young we steer

them by the rudders of pleasure and pain; it is thought, too, that to enjoy the things we ought and to hate the things we ought has the greatest bearing on virtue of character.¹

We have no doubt about how close pleasure is to our nature, but whether or not pleasure can be used as an instrument of character building seems somewhat obscure in the light of our modern civilization. It seems more to be an instrument of destruction. On all sides we see that with the multiplication of instruments of pleasure runs a parallel multiplication of instruments of pain. One fruit of modern science is the long list of creature comforts; another is the atom bomb. The thirst and wild hunger for pleasure in its various shapes of power and wealth, fame and luxury, has brought mankind almost to the opposite poles, to helplessness and poverty, to shame and misery; and it seems gradually to be coming to despair.

Yet in our enthusiasm against the god of mammon, we may perhaps overstate the case for the God of goodness and truth. We may come to hold that the highest vocation of man in this life is to avoid all pleasure. We would thus be setting down one lie with another, the second more vicious than the first. To say that man should seek carnal pleasure in all things is at least as bad as saying that he should seek no pleasure at all. The first may overemphasize one aspect of man's nature; it does not, as the second, annihilate it.

DELIGHT IN THE LORD

The question troubled St. Thomas, and he proposed it by asking himself whether all pleasure was evil. The answer occurred to him immediately, for did he not chant every day at Office a thousand phrases from the Psalter which told of the goodness in pleasure? "*Delectare in Domino,*" said Psalm 36. "Delight in the Lord." But if all delights were evil, it would be evil to delight in the Lord, which was nonsense. He had the immediate answer. However, he chewed the problem a little more, looked at some of the historical aspects, and sifted the truth from the lie. The Stoics held that all pleasure was bad, but St. Thomas points out that they didn't know the difference between bodily and intellectual pleasure. Yet some preachers of falsehood, like Speusippus, held that because most people incline to immoderate bodily pleasure, and become slaves to comfort, it would be perfectly right to lead them in the opposite direction by preaching that all pleasure was evil, since only in this way could they reach the mean. St. Thomas says this is wholly wrong, and does so with some vigor.

¹ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1172^a 1.18-24.

"No one," and this is literal translation, "is able to live without some sensible and corporeal pleasure." So these preachers lied, and their example confirmed them in the lie. They ate. They slept. They sought relief from the heat, or from the cold. And probably they did much more than this when those to whom they preached were not looking. Again, since example does much more than words in getting men to live virtuously, these men, by evil example, were doubly wicked.

More positively, St. Thomas shows that pleasure is perfected both in motion and in rest. It involves both an operation and a resting in a good thing. We do not enjoy a piece of gum until we are chewing it. If the thing desired is according to right reason, and if the operation is in no way contrary to legitimate desires, then the pleasure is morally good.²

Pleasure also can be spiritual or corporeal, and in seeking which is the greater, St. Thomas again immediately remembers the Psalter, and especially that wonderful Psalm that runs through all the little hours on Sunday, the 118th. He chose the 103rd verse, "*Quam dulcia faucibus meis eloquia tua, super mel ori meo!*" "How sweet are thy words to my tongue, more than honey to my mouth!" And since honey is understood here to mean the greatest of bodily pleasures, the conclusion is clear.³ The words of the Lord were sweeter to St. Thomas, were sweeter to the Psalmist, and should be sweeter to all who chant that Psalm than all the honey in the world.

Here, then, we have a start. From Aristotle and St. Thomas we have drawn some fundamental principles concerning joy. Bodily pleasure, under right reason is good; spiritual pleasure, more properly called joy, is better; and both can be used in character formation. But why do we waste time on such a subject when the world is falling down all about us? Where is the connection between this joy and that grief? It may be that precisely because they are opposites, we have brought them together. Opposites reveal one another, as the saying goes, and knowing the nature of joy, we may be able to answer problems on sorrow. But first let us look to Our Holy Mother the Church for counsel.

THE JOYFUL WAY

In recognition of the validity of the above principles, the Church urges us, no matter what our circumstances, to be joyful. She knows that for us to enjoy the things we ought on this earth is a wonderfully efficacious way of bringing ourselves to eternal joy. If we can learn

² *Summa Theol.* Ia IIae, q. 34, a. 1.

³ *Summa Theol.* Ia IIae, q. 31, a. 5.

to enjoy prayer, to find pleasure in reading the inspired Word, to relax, as it were, in the Truth, then we shall gradually, but certainly, come to hate all opposite things. When Our Mother teaches us to love the beauty in virtue, she has, in the very same stroke, taught us to hate the ugliness in sin. Delight in the Lord, and sin will be an abomination.

The Church knows, too, that delight involves both motion and rest. The last and greatest pleasure we hope and fervently pray for is had in the activity, the *motion*, of seeing God; still, we pray that one day we may be brought to eternal *rest*. While we are on earth, then, we are given by the Church truths to think about, prayers to say, things to do. We must move to find rest. No fisherman ever much enjoyed sitting idle at home. He may plan his bait, select his hooks, limber up his rod and tackle at home, but he is not fishing until he is up, and out, and down to the sea. Then he is relaxed.

The Church knows that in the life of every man there is at least one fish he must catch, his own soul, and it, at times, can be as slippery as the most elusive of tunas; it can blow and spout and be as generally troublesome as the harpooned Moby Dick. The business of saving one's soul involves all of the planning and preparation, all of the patience and alertness, and indeed, all of the joy of an old-time whaling trip. But first we must learn the tricks, and we can turn to no one more qualified to teach us than to this Mother who made her appearance on this earth two thousand years ago among nets and lines and fishermen.

From the beginning the Church admitted the problem, and she was not idle. As any community, when desirous of getting her members interested in a cause, will seek out her song writers, and tell them to put it to music, so the Church, not disdaining human prudence, told her song writers to get busy. St. Ambrose, St. Gregory the Great, and a host of others, sat down. When they stood up we had a miracle called Plain Song. It was song and, as such, was pleasurable to the ear; it was plain and did not obscure the text. We were singing our prayers.

Learn to enjoy the things you ought. It is the Queen of the Fisherman who is speaking, and we are her children. Our function is never idleness, for we must be down doing business in the great waters. Storms may arise, as indeed, today, they have; the ship may be lashed, beaten, and all but shattered, yet we shall hang on, and somewhere down in our hearts is the strong tide of courage, of hope, and always, of joy. The waters may be troubled, but the spirit of God still moves over them.

The joy has had a thousand expressions in the past. The lives of the saints are filled with it. St. Augustine wept when, in the early days of his new faith, he heard the songs of the Church; wept, that is, for joy. St. Dominic's face was radiant when he gave to the poor; tears streamed down St. Thomas' face at Compline. Bl. Francis Capillas, Bl. Theophane Venard desired martyrdom, and when it came, could not contain their joy; the little Therese accepted joyfully her little life of great sacrifice.

We may follow the long history of the Catholic Church on this earth, and trace this joy at every step. Now it is in the smoky atmosphere of the catacombs; now out on the open road on the lips of a friar singing that most joyful of songs, the *Ave Maris Stella*. It is in the lecture halls at Paris, laughing with its companion, Truth; it ascends the pulpit; and even on the scaffold at Tyburn we see it rise above the blood and torture and pay tribute to its Lord. In a thousand different shapes, all over the world it is with us. *Delectare in Domino*. Delight in the Lord.

And the quiet voice of the Queen through the storms and tempests and hurricanes is always the same. Enjoy the things you ought; learn to enjoy the Thing you ought. Delight, my children, in the Lord. So we, now, have the tempest; we have the wreckage of the war; the wreckage of peace; we have great difficulty in seeing the image of Our Lord imprinted on the hearts of many, many men. Yet even now, when we gather together to pray; when we receive the great Benediction, all of us sing in answer to the priest, and we sing with one voice: *Omne delectamentum in se habentem*. All delight, all joy, is had in the Lord.

If we mean that, we shall never despair.