

JOYFUL EXPECTATIONS

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ONE OF THE most puzzling features of human experience is the unusual outcome of so many of our wishes and aspirations. Take, for example, the commonplace experience of visiting a friend. How frequently does it happen that we find the moments preceding the visit more pleasureable and filled with greater delight than those actually spent in his presence. Would it not be more reasonable if the reverse were true . . . that upon the fulfillment of the hoped-for joyous meeting, the pleasure would reach its zenith? But no, such is not always the case. Very often, the fanciful pictures painted in the imagination bear little relation to what actually takes place.

This apparent anomaly stems from the very nature of human happiness which has a disconcerting knack of being more alluring and intoxicating in imagination than in reality. When our desires reach out to transitory objects of happiness, these objects no longer retain their burning appeal and we turn to something else. That is why, if we wish to be really happy, we must resolutely fix for ourselves a goal outside this world—a goal that will fulfill all our desires as no earthly one can do. Still, this foretasting or anticipation of some future joy, both on a natural and supernatural plane, can serve a very useful purpose since anticipation is practically synonymous with preparation. The foretaste prepares our hearts to savor more fully the approaching happiness which would otherwise catch us unprepared.

PREPARATION

"Look about thee, O Jerusalem, towards the East and behold the joy that cometh to thee from God." Attuned to the needs of the whole person, the liturgical year is organized in such a way that we may derive the utmost from the celebration of the great festivals in the life of Our Lord. Realizing the relationship of preparation and anticipation to lasting enjoyment, the Church has specifically designated

"waiting periods" before the arrival of the great feasts. One need point only to Advent—those weeks which precede the birth of the Infant Saviour—as evidence that the Church is keenly aware of the way human nature operates . . . time to recall, to prepare. Just as one tunes up a musical instrument, so too during Advent, we are invited to attune our hearts in advance to welcome fittingly the gift of the Infant Jesus.

"Come, Lord Jesus," is the refrain which constantly resounds in the Advent liturgy. But, perhaps subconsciously we ask: Has not this already come to be? Were not all the expectations of the Jewish people fulfilled in the birth of Christ many centuries ago? Must we waste our time in useless remembrance of past ages? Does not this approach instill in us a sense of make believe? Not at all! The Church's invitation to prepare for the Saviour, as if we were still waiting for Him, is not artificial and brings great benefits. By accepting this invitation, we enter into that great hope which in itself was salutary for humanity before the coming of Christ and which now alone can make us ready to receive Him. Christ will not find room in our hearts if desire does not make room. It is this paradox which gives the Advent season a spirit all its own . . . a unique blending of penitence and joy. A penitence that is fostered and nourished by desire—to be prepared—and at the same time a joy that finds its explanation only by the presence within us through Charity of what we desire! Just as in human friendship when the moments preceding a visit are filled with pleasure, so too in awaiting the birth of the Infant Jesus, our hearts are filled with the sense of that joyous coming. The Church invites us to open our hearts already to the joy of the Lord, Who is coming, Who is almost here, so that when He has come, we may be *filled* with joy. In the third Sunday of Advent, "Gaudete Sunday," we are told: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice, the Lord is nigh"—a fact which is a guarantee in itself that joy is not incompatible with Christian penitence. But what is this joy that the Advent Liturgy speaks about so often?

WHAT IT IS NOT . . .

True Christian joy is a concept whose meaning and reality has largely been lost in the modern world. In its place has arisen a nervous, frantic pursuit of pleasure—a pleasure that finds its ultimate expression in the sense delights of the body. No longer do we find the true spirit of joy—the mysterious joy that caused Elizabeth's child to leap within her at the time of the Visitation—the earliest manifestation of the presence of the Word Incarnate in our world. And this

was meant to be put a prelude to the outburst of joy that rocked the silent confines of the stable at Bethlehem six months later. For in that silent stable was born the Christ Child whose great purpose is and always will be to fill us with His own joy. "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you."

EFFECT OF CHARITY

Just as the waters of a spring bubble only as long as there is an ample supply of water at their source, so too joy floods the heart only insofar as Charity dwells in the soul. For the source of joy is Charity—that divinely infused Theological virtue by which we love God for Himself and ourselves and neighbors for the love of God. Or to put it more simply, Charity is a sort of friendship between God and man—a friendship, as we shall see, that is made possible only by the munificent generosity of the God-Head. If we wish to understand the effect of this friendship, joy, we must go to its source for an adequate explanation.

All of us have experienced the treasure of friendship in greater or less degrees on the human level. First of all, friendship demands a mutual, benevolent love—a disinterested, generous love that is shared by both friends. This mutual, benevolent love prompts us to wish only good to the object of our affections. We wish him as much good as we wish ourselves; we love him as much as we love ourselves; he becomes "another self." It is evident that it is no easy task to attain this quality of benevolent love when the dominant influence of self love is so inherent in each one of us. But therein lies the real beauty of true love! Benevolent love makes us forget ourselves and causes our will to be identified with the will of our friend. Heart speaks to heart! We neither want nor seek any recompense for ourselves but are concerned only with the well-being of the one we love with a truly selfless love. Impossible? No! The dynamic force of love is the strongest motivating principle in our entire makeup.

Aware then of this first requisite for human friendship, we can now perceive more effectively the nature of this benevolent love as it exists between man and God. "Let us therefore love, because God first loved us." Certainly, there can be no doubt about the benevolence of His love. Why were we created if not to share the supreme good of everlasting happiness that God has promised to those whom He loves? Innumerable times God has reiterated His love, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." Indeed, He so loved the world that He gave it His only Begotten Son as a saviour. While it is easy to see the utter generosity of God's love, it is more difficult to understand

how man may return this tremendous, creative love of God. And friendship must be mutual. Since God Himself is the supreme good, it is clear that we cannot wish Him any good He does not already have. Our response then consists in returning His creative love with our own affective love. In other words, we respond to the purpose of creation by loving God with our whole hearts. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength."

A final factor, an indispensable one, demands that the friends have some common interests as a solid basis for their friendship. Even though we all have many things in common with our fellow men, very rarely are we able to foster a mutual, benevolent love based on this "community." How then is friendship possible between the infinite goodness of God and our own limited, finite goodness? Is there a common denominator that will bridge the gap, so to speak, between the finite and the infinite? The answer to this question is proof once again of the awesome generosity of Almighty God. He has made it possible for us to meet Him on His level! He has made us partakers of the Divine Nature by giving us a share in His Intimate Life—through grace . . . which literally floods the soul with love. We become friends of God through this marvel of grace which serves as a basis for the Divine friendship of Charity in this life and which is a prelude to the beatific vision in heaven. Through Charity we soar into the supernatural order united to God. St. Thomas sums up the importance of this virtue by saying very simply: "Charity is the life of the soul as the soul is the life of the body." What more can be said!

IN THE SOUL

Because human love and friendship has become so closely allied with emotional reactions—the way we feel about a certain person—an erroneous notion of the love between God and man not infrequently makes its appearance. An inner glow, a kindly feeling—these are some of the things that are mistakenly considered as necessary manifestation of our love towards God. But Charity requires none of these. Happily for us in view of the vagaries of our feelings, friendship with God in Charity does not depend upon or reside in sense faculties. Rather, as is befitting a love between the created and the Creator, Charity dwells in man's spiritual nature. The Divine Goodness of God is the object of our love, an object that is completely spiritual. Obviously then, only a correspondingly spiritual faculty can receive such an exalted gift. And so Charity must be found in the will—that

faculty of the soul which has for its unique object, goodness. True enough, our intense love for God may sometimes overflow into our feelings but this is something quite accidental and by no means necessary. The important thing is not whether we "feel" this love but how we respond to it. "You are my friends if you do the things I command you."

JOY

After a discussion of the grandeur and beauty of friendship with God, it would seem almost superfluous to mention that joy is one of its consequent effects. Unlike human friendships than can and very often do undergo many disappointments and prolonged periods of sadness and sorrow, our joy in the Lord is complete and entire and can only be lost through grievous sin. This does not rule out the possibility of there being some sorrow in our lives—but it is a genuine sorrow that results from our awareness of past sins and the separation from God that followed. In no way does it diminish our possession of the joy we now have. Aware of the presence of the Divine Goodness in our souls through Charity, how can we be anything but joyful? This joy, just as its source, is not a sensible thing, but rather a spiritual thing residing in the depths of the soul where God dwells. Being a spiritual reality, it is somewhat difficult to describe in terms of something more familiar to us. However, since it is the gift of everyone in the state of grace, we can all experience it even though our words may be most inadequate in expressing its sublimity. Certainly though, it can easily be disassociated and distinguished from the delight that is found in the senses in the possession of a sensible good. Spiritual joy, the effect of Charity, is not of the order of earthly things. It is completely independent of them. Its giver is Divine! It is a sort of "rest" in the goodness of God and our sharing in that goodness.

In a sense it can be said that our whole life is one of expectation. This is particularly true of our liturgical life in Christ. Joyful expectation is the dominant note of the entire liturgy. But nowhere is that note of joy more pervasive than in the Advent season. The spiritual joy which it presages on Christmas day is actualized in the love of a Child. We "rest" in the goodness of God sharing the gift of His Son.



Let us rejoice. Sadness is not becoming upon the Birth Day of Life itself, which, now that the fear of death is ended, fills us with gladness, because of our own promised immortality. No one is excluded from sharing in this cheerfulness for the reason our joy is common to all men (St. Leo).