

## AN EDUCATION IN HAPPINESS

*Damian Day, O.P.*

“I know that happiness isn’t the goal that we pursue.” It was just a passing remark, almost a throwaway line. But in a room full of Dominicans, the comment elicited groans of consternation. What was so shocking about the remark from *Les Innocence*, a French film set in Poland during the winter of 1945, was that the speaker was not some nihilistic atheist or pessimistic workaholic, but a Catholic nun. It was frustrating to see our hyper-secularized society portray the Christian life as one contrary to the pursuit of happiness.

The scene raises a still more distressing thought: how many Christians themselves, especially among the young, do not understand that the goal of Christianity *is* happiness? There is a desperate need to teach society generally, and young people in particular, that the goal we pursue—indeed the very purpose of our lives—is everlasting happiness.

The virtues are aids that help in this endeavor. As a society, however, we no longer have a vocabulary of virtue. The world seems to have forgotten about the virtues and their purpose. And so man’s deepest desire for happiness is constantly frustrated. Without an awareness of the virtues, which are a constitutive element in the pursuit of happiness, we tend to misidentify what our final happiness consists in. Society in turn mis-educates the young, directing them towards vice, not virtue—towards goods and pleasures, not Goodness and joy. But our longing is not satisfied when we try to make finite goods or fleeting pleasures into our ultimate happiness. Parents, Catholic schools, and the Church in general have received the mission to articulate the relationship between virtue and our desire for happiness. It is time to rededicate ourselves to this mission.

## THE NEGLECTED PATH OF VIRTUE

A lot of people these days are unhappy. And yet, everyone is searching for happiness, many frantically. Some young people search for it in the party scene or the hook-up culture, while others throw themselves into a cult of experience, trying to fill their lives with adventure and novelty. What has become scarce in our culture are people who are searching for happiness through a life of virtue. Most people do have some idea that they ought to be a good person. But, unfortunately, this perspective has mostly been reduced to a notion that they should not offend others. What is needed, especially in the Church, is a more robust understanding of virtue and clearer preaching concerning its relationship to happiness.

One reason for the current state of affairs is that most people have never been taught that a virtuous life is a happy life. In a society that values and stresses education, we have neglected to teach how to truly live a happy life. Pope Benedict XVI, addressing Catholic educators assembled at the Catholic University of America in 2008, reflected that while “we have sought diligently to engage the intellect of our young, perhaps we have neglected the will” (*Meeting with Catholic Educators*). Without a will strengthened by the virtues, the young, buffeted by the vicissitudes of life and the ideologies of the day, are left without a crucial aid in the search for happiness. It is necessary for Christians to fill to this void, with the confidence that God has revealed the answer to our desire for happiness.

## TEACHING VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

Virtue begins in the home. It is from their parents that children first learn how to act. The Second Vatican Council referred to the family as “the first school of the social virtues” (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 3). Most parents, even if they are not conscious of running a school of virtue, are engaged in teaching their children

some system of right and wrong. When a father tells his son, for instance, not to steal his little sister's toy, he is teaching the virtue of justice. This comes naturally to parents because they love their children and have an intuition that it is best for their children to learn to do what is right. This process is more fruitful, however, if the parents have a clear understanding of what virtue is and why they should teach it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines virtues as "firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith" (1804). Virtues are what help us to order our lives in light of our final happiness. Parents want their children to be happy. By teaching virtue in both word and deed, parents help their children in the search for happiness.

Catholic education also plays a special role in directing youth to happiness. In a society where morality and virtue are almost completely absent from education, Catholic schools have an especially urgent mission to teach and form youth on the path to happiness. Pope Benedict stressed the need for educators to have "intellectual charity," realizing that their "responsibility to lead the young to truth is nothing less than an act of love" (*Meeting with Catholic Educators*). One who loves desires the happiness of others. Educators are called to form, with love, the young in truth and virtue so that they know how to seek happiness. The very purpose and dignity of education is this fostering of "the true perfection and happiness of those to be educated" (*Meeting with Catholic Educators*). The goal of education, then, is happiness. Education consists in the discovery of our true happiness and the formation of the habits that assist us in reaching that happiness.

In evangelization and in the formation of youth, it is necessary to stress repeatedly that the totally satisfying happiness we all seek is found only in God. Perhaps the reason so many people today are not excited about the idea of heaven is precisely because this has not been emphasized enough. If the conception of heaven in the mind of most people is something like a boring



*The Holy Family at Home (Photo: Lawrence Lew, O.P.)*

church choir that never ends, it is no wonder many do not see it as worth the effort. This common view is summed up by Billy Joel: “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints / The sinners are much more fun” (“Only the Good Die Young”). Virtue seems to stifle the vitality of human life, leading to eternal boredom or sadness rather than eternal happiness. Sin is more exciting and fulfilling. This mentality marks a brazen rebellion against true happiness, inspired by deep confusion about who man is and what he is made for.

Another source of confusion is found in the misconception that the moral life is nothing but a life of obligations and prohibitions. That it is strictly duty-based. Seen in this way, the moral life is stifling. But properly understood as a search for happiness, the virtuous life becomes much more attractive; it leads us towards what we desire above all else. Living a virtuous life means living a happy life, if imperfectly so. The Christian practice of the virtues opens man to his final happiness and bestows a certain

happiness now, so that “the virtuous man is happy to practice them” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1810). As a man grows in virtue, he grows closer to his final happiness. The practice of the virtues then brings with it a taste of heaven. Dorothy Day loved the quotation attributed to St. Catherine of Siena: “All the way to heaven is heaven.” Striving for virtue, we participate incompletely in the totally satisfying happiness of heaven.

#### DIRECTED TO HAPPINESS

To the Church has been entrusted the mission of proclaiming clearly and confidently that, far from stifling our human desires, the Christian life can produce total human fulfilment. From all her members, the message must go forth: man has been made for a much deeper happiness, and that happiness is found in the one everlasting and perfect God. Our Christian goal of growing in union with God ends up corresponding to and being nothing other than the fulfilment of the desire that is in every human heart for happiness. The pursuit of holiness is the pursuit of happiness. As the Dominican moral theologian Servais Pinckaers puts it, “Our God does not love unhappiness” (*The Pursuit of Happiness—God’s Way*, 28). God desires that we seek and find happiness. As Christians, we know and proclaim that happiness is indeed the goal that we pursue—contrary to what a film like *Les Innocence* may suggest. God has given us the desire. In Him, it can be fulfilled.

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