



Fr. Ralph's Homily on Joy
December 23, 2007

HOMILY 12.23.07

The word Emmanuel occurs three times in this Sunday's readings: Isaiah(7:10), the alleluia antiphon; Matthew's gospel(1:23)— God with us, God with you as an individual, God with me.

So in my homily I would like to ponder the joy of Christmas, since Emmanuel obviously is the root cause of this joy.

What is this joy? How can we get it? I was challenged in my Theology class for eleventh graders a couple of days ago when the Mother Teresa reading for the day went like this: 'Joy is not simply a matter of temperament in the service of God and souls; it is always hard — all the more reason why we should try to acquire it and make it grow in our hearts.'

'*Make it grow! Try to acquire it? Isn't joy a gift?*' I found myself thinking?" Isn't it a free gift of the Holy Spirit? Are we supposed to force God's hand? I felt she was requiring too much of me.

These words of Mother Teresa are all the more poignant now that we are aware thru her recently published letters of the depth and length of her 'Dark Night of the Soul'. How could she be so adamant about the 'requirement' of joy in the midst of her almost constant darkness? It didn't seem to make too much sense.

Then Fr Abbot forwarded to the community yesterday some texts of Isaiah with commentaries from the patristic Fathers of the Church and I read:

"I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron. I will give you the *treasures of darkness* ...that you may know that it is I the Lord God of Israel who call you by your name." Origen commented that the revealing of these treasures *requires* the work of God. It is *he* who reveals to us these secrets of his love if we will only let him.



But how *do* we let him.?

Pope John Paul II described these secrets in one of the most memorable sentences of his whole pontificate:

In the GOSPEL OF LIFE he wrote:

‘Precisely by contemplating the precious blood of Christ, the sign of his self-giving love, the believer learns to recognize and appreciate the almost divine dignity of every human being.’(#25)

And I immediately thought: ‘What me, a frail selfish human being, have an almost divine dignity?’ He’s gotta be kidding!

Yet *this* is one of the treasures of darkness that the birth of Jesus has revealed to us if we let him reveal it to us?

Our joy therefore consists in allowing Jesus to be constantly in us so that his being, his divine being, takes over our human being and we become alive with his own kind of life. His *divine* life.

Our joy is in harboring Christ in our hearts. Letting his self-giving love become ours.

But as Mother Teresa suggests this is ‘hard work’ or, as Pope Benedict says in his most recent encyclical published on the feast of St Andrew 30 November this year,

“in the end my saying YES to love always requires the surrender of myself otherwise it becomes selfishness”

so having joy is equivalent to receiving God’s love into my heart and this involves embracing self-surrender or embracing suffering.

The quest for joy, the quest for Isaiah’s ‘hidden-treasure-of-darkness’, is always a quest for unselfish love. For a freedom from those bonds of sin that prevent my selfish mind and heart being absorbed into the mind and heart of Jesus; that prevent Jesus *being* in me and *working* through me.

Madeleine Delbr el describes this as a detachment that allows me the freedom to meet the needs of others unbiased by my relationships of kinship or friendship that I might think claim priority, but based solely on the greatness of their need. This



would be how we possess Jesus' love this would be how we live his joy ,Mother Teresa's joy in the world.

I have two last things to say if you will bear with me: the first is about this ideal of detached Love. It is a poem on Velcro perhaps the first poem on Velcro it is called VOWED and it goes thus:

VOWED

travelling
with velcro soles
on a velcro carpet
I tear myself away
from yesterday's people
to give myself
totally
to each person
today
with
All Your Love



The second is anecdotal:

In my early days in St Louis back in the 70 s---gosh some 30 years ago now!! We had a wonderful down-to-earth monk here called Father Mark Haidy. He had great humor but his whole life seemed like one big grind, one huge suffering for Jesus echoed, by the time I got to know him here by the gasps for air that his earlier smoking-induced-emphysema caused him. On one occasion when I had in my typical stumbling way attempted to articulate the experience of our awareness of God's great love that brings us fleetingly great joy he slid this paper under my door. I will read what is on it to close these ramblings:

It is a quote from Abbot Cuthbert Butler's Western Monasticism:
It is about Blaise Pascal who died in 1662

“...after his death was found stitched to the lining of his doublet, something which is called his memorial – a scrap of parchment with a rough drawing of a flaming X around it a few words whereby he tried to keep alive the memory of a mystic experience

“In the year of grace 1564 Monday 23 November the day of S. Clement pope and martyr and others in the martyrology, the eve of St Chrysogonus martyr and others, from about half-past ten in the evening till about half an hour after midnight

+ FIRE

God of Abraham,

God of Isaac, God of Jacob

not of the philosophers and the learned.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Certitude, Joy, Certitude, Emotion, Sight, Joy, forgetfulness of the
World and of all outside of God.

The World hath not known thee but I have known thee.

Joy, Joy, Joy,

Tears of Joy.

My God, wilt thou leave me?

Let me not be separated from thee forever.”

...of all the attempts to describe such experiences these barely
articulate incoherent exclamations of Pascal – the intellectual...the
philosopher, the master of language --- are for me beyond all
compare the most eloquent and the most realistic.”