

THE ORDER OF PENANCE AND OF JOY

By Fr. Faustine, O.F.M.

II. TRUE JOY

"Joyfulness of the heart is the life of a man, and a never failing treasure of holiness." (Eccl. XXX, 23.)

Among the many but thoroughly practical rules of perfection which St. Paul gave the first Christians, we repeatedly meet with this admonition: "Rejoice always!" St. Paul, however, not only admonishes them to be happy and cheerful, he also indicates the source of their constant joy: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice." (Phil. IV, 4.) All else over which we may rejoice is fleeting and subject to change.

The fear of the Lord alone is constant and unchangeable, and fills the heart with an indescribable happiness. "How great is the multitude of thy sweetness, O Lord," exclaims the Psalmist, "which thou hast hidden for them that fear thee! Which thou hast wrought for them that hope in thee!" (Ps. XXX, 20.) St. John Chrysostom says, "Whosoever fears God as he should and confides in him, has the source of all pleasure and every joy. Do you desire a joyful heart?" he continues. "Then seek it not in riches, nor in health, nor in honors, nor in power, nor in lust, nor in any other passing thing. Be mindful only of the wisdom, which is from God, and strive after virtue." And in "The Imitation of Christ" we read, "God alone, the Eternal, the Immeasurable, who fills all things, is the consolation of the soul and the true joy of the heart."

True joy, therefore, can only come from heaven; in fact, according to Fr. Ambrose de Lombez, it is a participation of the joy of the Blessed in heaven. It is an echo of the heavenly music, heard on the hills of Bethlehem: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will!"

It is deeply rooted in our hearts, and we can be deprived of it only by ourselves. The greater progress we make on the road of perfection, the greater will be our joy; on the other hand, the more sinful we are, and the more we abuse God's grace, the less real joy will be our portion. Just as the fish can not live out of water, so we can not have real joy if we are separated from God, in whom, as St. Paul says, "we live, and we move, and we are."

Also those joys, that spring from the proper use of the goods of this world, are true joys, because they, too, come from God. God gives his gifts, temporal and spiritual, to man. To one he gives five talents, to another two, to another but one. But man is only the steward of his possessions. As long as he bears this fact well in mind, and considers God to be his Lord and Master to whom he must one day render a strict account of his stewardship, so long will he use his possessions wisely and justly, and so long, too, will he possess true joy. "This joy is a gift of heaven," says Fr. Ambrose de Lombez, "a precious fruit of peace with God and a sweet solace in the troubles of life." This joy fosters gratitude toward God, and serves to strengthen the bond of love between man and his Creator. It awakens in man the spirit of charity, and the desire of aiding his fellow men. It exerts, finally, a most beneficial influence on our lives, serving as a relaxation in our work and assisting us to fulfill our duties with ease and alacrity.

This real joy, the joy of the children of God, is unknown to the world, so much so that the world does not even believe in its existence. Yet, it is an undeniable fact that more real joy is to be

found among the children of God, whether they live in the midst of the world or behind cloistered walls, than can be found among the irreligious and in the haunts of vice. Of course, the world will not agree to this statement, for it will ever blaspheme what it does not understand, and it can not understand how virtue and penance can ever beget joy.

Hence a commentator on the Rule of the Third Order writes: "The world that speaks of penance only with contempt and ridicule, is suffering from a severe case of confused ideas; it does not even understand the true meaning of penance and penitents. Penance is nothing else but a struggle against the passions and cravings of the flesh, against 'concupiscence of the eyes, concupiscence of the flesh, and pride of life.' This struggle removes the hindrances, and makes level the way that true joy may enter into the soul."

The same is conceded by Father F. W. Faber to be the cause of the exuberant joy of the religious. "If the saints are such gay spirits and the monks and nuns such unaccountably cheerful creatures," he says, "it is simply because their bodies, like St. Paul's, are chastised and kept under with an unflinching sharpness and a mortified discretion. He that would be joyous, must first be mortified, and he that is mortified is already joyous with the joy that is of pure, celestial birth."

Now we understand the words of St. Peter of Alcantara: "O happy penance, that has obtained for me such happiness!" and also the saying of St. Jerome: "In spite of penitential tears and heart-rending sighs, I am sometimes so joyous that I fancy myself already with the Angels." We know now, dear Tertiaries, that penance and joy perfectly agree, and we can only wish that all things else in this world agreed as well. But why are there

so many who still doubt the joy and happiness of the good? It is because of their envy. They see and feel that they themselves are not happy despite the pleasures of the flesh and the world to which they give themselves, and they hence are loath to admit real happiness in others. Their opinion, however, on this question will not diminish the joy and happiness of the children of God, nor will it increase their own joy.

"No one," writes Bishop Keppler, "can live without joy; not even the Christian soul following the path of perfection." Joy, then, far from being an enemy of penance and the Third Order, is a necessary element thereof. "God loves a cheerful giver," says the Apostle, and Tertiaries, above all, should never forget this. You have given yourselves to God, and now he demands not only your faithful service, but he demands that you tender it to him gladly and cheerfully. Only then will your service bring you merit. Thus we read in the Book of Ecclesiasticus, "In every gift show a cheerful countenance and sanctify thy tithes with joy." (Eccl. XXXV, 11.) The greater our cheerfulness in serving God, the greater also will the honor be, we pay him. St. Francis, our holy Father, would never permit any sadness among his brethren, "because," he said, "that is proof that the spirit is not willing and the body too slothful for good."

Let Tertiaries, therefore, ever bear in mind what Father Faber says of joy in doing good, which he calls the atmosphere of heroic virtues; "It is doing no injury to the mortified character of high sanctity to say that joy is one of the most important elements in the spiritual life, and nothing is more common than cases in which persons are kept back from great attainments or from persevering in their vocations by the want of joy."