

6. November 2024

Sources of true joy

Phil 2:12-18

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

The joy that comes from faith... Nothing can be more attractive to others than a Christian who lives in this joy. The joy of which St Paul speaks is not simply an optimistic state of mind peculiar to our human nature, however pleasant it may be to deal with a person of that temperament. The joy he speaks of is a fruit of the Holy Spirit; a joy that does not fade even when suffering and persecution come, when the dark sides of life seem to dominate and the motives for a merely natural joy disappear.

I remember a priest from Belgium, now deceased, who sometimes celebrated Mass in our community. He belonged to another community, the Foyer de Charité, whose origins are closely linked to a woman who was very close to God, Marthe Robin. She had been paralysed for a long time. This priest visited her one day and said to himself that he would recognise the authenticity of her mystical vocation if she lived in joy despite her suffering. In fact, he met a woman who reflected that joy which comes from a deep relationship with God, as a fruit of the Spirit. This convinced him and he became a member of this community.

In today's reading, the Apostle Paul gives us some guidelines on how this spiritual joy can grow in us.

First of all, he talks about obedience.... Like the Christians of Philippi, we too are called to follow Christ in obedience. Obedience is not an attitude that oppresses the person; rather, it is the fundamental disposition of allowing oneself to be led by God, putting one's

own desires and ideas aside. In the concrete practice of obedience, God's guidance and grace can be made effective in our lives without hindrance. Our model is always the Lord Himself, who was obedient to the point of death (cf. Phil 2:8).

As a fruit of this obedience out of love for God, the joy of living in union with Him, glorifying Him and allowing His will to be done in our lives grows. In order for obedience to be truly joyful, it is important that it is not simply mechanical or, worse, that it takes on the characteristics of servility. It must come from love for the Lord and therefore be given in inner freedom.

The second important piece of advice in today's reading is that we should work out our salvation with fear and trembling. These words remove any false security about our salvation. There is a danger of becoming careless about faith and the way of salvation, of becoming overconfident, and even of falling into an attitude of self-righteousness, thinking we have the right to judge others and easily becoming blind to our own mistakes.

In this context, 'fear and trembling' means being aware of the responsibility we have before God and others for our lives, and making a serious effort to overcome our wrong attitudes as well as our so-called venial sins... When we do this, joy will emerge as a fruit that goes hand in hand with the worthy seriousness of the way of Christ.

We also hear St Paul's exhortation to do everything "*without grumbling or questioning*". This means doing God's will with joy, to the extent that the gift of piety becomes effective in us and we learn to overcome the resistances that come from our human nature. This is also the source of true joy!

Finally, we are advised to hold high the word of life, that is, to hold fast to the words of Sacred Scripture. The Word of God is indeed light in the darkness and gives true life. The more deeply we taste it, the more its light will spread in us, so that joy in God and in His Word will grow.