

Pastoral Perspective

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Pope John Paul: The Call to Christian Joy

Every so often we are strikingly reminded of something so true, so simple, so fundamental that it is hard for us to imagine how we ever got in such a state that we needed to be reminded of the obvious.



The short but very touching papal ministry of Pope John Paul was just such a brilliant reminder of something very simple.

His thirty-four days as Pope were a vivid sacrament of the fundamental reality of Christian Joy and of our call to manifest it.

In a very brief time he taught us all again that happiness is an essential sign of the presence of God's salvation in our midst. And he taught us this simply by allowing his own happiness to shine forth uninhibited, even in awesome circumstances.

It is possible that the whole of Albino Luciani's life was meant to culminate in one brief month in which he smiled so often and in such a humble and genuine way that the world and we could know again the essential simplicity of what God asks of and promises his people: "if you loved me, you would rejoice . . . love one another, as I have loved you."

When we get bogged down in daily tasks, pastoral duties, household chores, business matters, the nitty-gritty of our schedules, it is so easy for us — because we are in some ways basically a forgetful people — to lose sight of the simple reality that Christian life and Christian faith, if they are real and deep, confer on the Christian an unconcealable joy, a true happiness that shines forth without calculation or self-regard. In some Christians this charism of visible joyfulness is more especially radiant and evident, for the sake of the encouragement and upbuilding of the whole people. This was the case with Pope John Paul.

In his last conversation with his disciples before his death, we are told that Jesus said to them:

If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.

It is sometimes hard for us to remember that the effect of God's redeeming presence in our lives is that our joy should be complete. We forget that the great message of all the prophecies proclaiming the coming of the messianic age is precisely this: that God wishes his people to be completely happy, that gladness is indeed his gift to our hearts, and that he has poured forth his own spirit upon us so that we might be filled with these fruits of his spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, self-control.



... a deeply and thoroughly happy man, with the kind of happiness and inner joy that can be born only of faith, of love, of hope, of purity of desire, of humility of mind and heart.

We forget that the great claim of Isaiah is true, age after age, all year long, not just on Christmas Eve:

The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone. You have made their gladness greater, you have made their joy increase; They rejoice in your presence as men rejoice at harvest time, as men are happy when they are celebrating victory.

Yes, we forget sometimes that a great light has shone and that God has made our joy increase — but then into our lives comes a smiling, loving, joyous Christian man. Up close or across thousands of miles via satellite we see his unmistakable happiness and the humble radiance of his personal Christian joy. Then we are able to know once again in a renewed way the beauty and the utter simplicity of God's life given to the human heart.

And then perhaps we look into our own mirrors and notice our own often worried, over-somber, perhaps even harried or slightly grumpy countenances. We realize how much we have put our own precious light under a bushel, how we have not allowed our own joy at knowing God's immense gifts to us to shine forth as it should in this land of shadow.

Whether through tiredness, or semi-ungratefulness for the gladness God has given us, or nit-picking fear about relatively minor matters, or blind small-mindedness, or excessive preoccupation with ourselves, or too little humility of mind or heart, we have come to seem to others dull, cold, "busy" apparently unhappy people. And so we have denied the poor

world God so loves as well as those with whom we live and work the sacrament of seeing and partaking more fully in the gladness God has given to us all.

I do not know enough about Pope John Paul to know whether or not he had this great charism of inspiring happiness all his life. Perhaps he did. But certainly he was seized by a profound realization on the day of his election as Pope. He must have sensed, by the grace of God whose Vicar he was, that the one great gift he could give to a troubled world was the gift of smiling, tender, affectionate personal love and happiness, manifested as warmly and genuinely as possible to each person he met. Of all papal calls he chose or was chosen to embody what is, paradoxically, both the hardest and the easiest: the call to universal love and radiant proclamation of the joy that God has given us.

Pope John Paul could not have suddenly trumped up this joy in order to put on a show, as it were. It has to have been that he was a deeply and thoroughly happy man, with the kind of happiness and inner joy that can be born only of faith, of love, of hope, of purity of desire, of humility of mind and heart.

When one has made that kind of room for the joy bestowing presence of God in his life, then God becomes truly God for him, and he becomes truly a son of God, giving glory to the Father by such simple things as his own smile, his laughter, his hand clasp, his kiss of peace. It is not at all surprising that such a person is reading "The Imitation of Christ" when he dies.

We have conducted a number of surveys in this Diocese over the years. I wonder whether we would ever dare ask ourselves how many truly happy Christians we have encountered in our lives here. I wonder whether each of us dares ask himself or herself whether he or she is perceived as a joy-bestowing sign of the rejoicing presence of God, of the gladness and good news he has given us in Christ Jesus.

The brief papal ministry of Pope John Paul will stand for a long time as a call to all of us to try to do better at revealing the happiness that grows at the heart of our Christian faith. His smile is for us a special moment in our Christian lives, a special witness to the fundamental simplicity of the ministry to which we are all called: the ministry of rejoicing and of enabling others to rejoice in the goodness of God and in the consequent goodness of his people.

We have to work on our faces and on our words. We have to set our eyes on the cause of our joy and live and speak continually from glad and grateful hearts. We have to grow in humility, selflessness, and large-heartedness. We have to think of our brother's need for our smile, more than of our own need for his smile. We have to remember how much others deserve and need the support of our happiness and love.

Pope John Paul, we thank you for the extraordinary witness of your days as Pope. We pray that you will continue to teach us by your gift of happiness, and that you will help us to taste and share more fully the happiness that is ours.

More Opinions

From 4 'Courage,' Brother!

Editor:

Brother Francis, I read your article in the "Opinion" section of the Courier, and wonder why it bothers a man of God what people say because of your devotion to Jesus Christ. When you said "If I talked about religion all the time like a fanatic, I could understand," I thought, why apologize for talking about God to other people? That is what followers of Christ are supposed to be doing. Consider it a compliment when people consider you a fanatic as long as the fanaticism is

Christ centered. I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and St. Paul wasn't either. Remember, brother, Jesus told us to remember that they hated him before they hated you. Why apologize if Jesus is the first love of your life — he should be! The souls of men should be your concern. That is the natural concern for a true man of God.

If the saints who are revered by Catholic people were on earth today, and showed the same devotion to Jesus which made them saints in the first place, they would be called, you guessed it, fanatics. So many Christians are afraid to speak out for Jesus. Indeed, like Peter, they are almost afraid to confess in public that they "know the man" for fear of putting

themselves in an unpopular position.

Jesus was fanatical in spreading the word of his father's kingdom. He went to the cross and gave his life. How many of us would give our life for our belief in Jesus. Most of us won't even stick up for him verbally. Why, someone might call us a fanatic.

Thank you, brother, for quoting Revelation, because there are many who take that book of the Bible seriously and think the return of Jesus is not too far in the future. No one knows when, so we are to be waiting, working, watching.

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Expressions of opinions should be brief, no longer than 1½ pages, typed, double-spaced, with names and addresses.

We reserve the right to edit as to length, offensive words, libelous statements, or to reject altogether. Generally speaking, however, only limited grammatical corrections will be made and letters will reflect the writer's own style.

We encourage readers to submit opinions but since we try to print letters from as many different contributors as possible we will publish no more than one letter a month from the same individual.