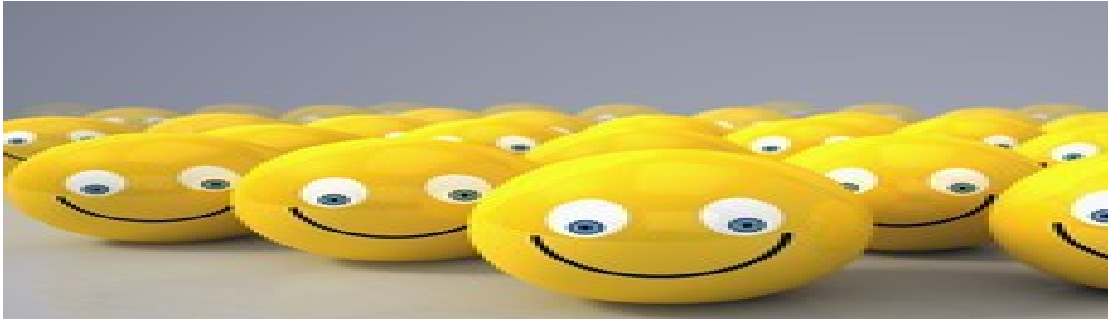


IDOL 02: Happiness

“Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob; whose hope is in the Lord his God” (Psalm 146:5)



There are tons of sayings and quotes on happiness nowadays. Let me share a few interesting ones: 1) Dale Carnegie: "It isn't what you have or who you are or where you are or what you are doing that makes you happy or unhappy. It is what you think about it"; 2) Walt Disney: "Happiness is a state of mind. It's just according to the way you look at things"; 3) Eleanor Roosevelt: "Happiness is not a goal...it's a by-product of a life well-lived"; 4) Albert Einstein: "A calm and modest life brings more happiness than the pursuit of success combined with constant restlessness"; 5) Ellen DeGeneres: "The thing everyone should realize is that the key to happiness is being happy by yourself and for yourself"; 6) Mohammed Ali: "Others may know pleasure, but pleasure is not happiness. It has no more importance than a shadow following a man"; 7) Dalai Lama: "Happiness is not something readymade. It comes from your own actions"; 8) Mahatma Gandhi: "Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony"¹; 9) St. Teresa of Calcutta: "There is no key to happiness; the door is always open"²; 10) CSDCC: "Accumulation by itself, even were it for the common good, is not a sufficient condition for bringing about authentic human happiness."³

**“Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding”
(Proverbs 3:13)**

Just last year, the Augustine Institute debuted the innovative new Catholic evangelization series titled “The Search”. Hosted by Chris Stefanick and featuring professionals such as scientists, astronauts, and artists, the seven episodes of *The Search* unpack, in a transformative

¹ The first eight quotes were taken from www.countryliving.com/life/g4815/happy-life-quotes/?slide (30 Best Happy Quotes - Quotes To Make You Happy [countryliving.com])

² www.azquotes.com

³ COMPEDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, n. 334 (See www.vatican.va).

way, the deepest, singular craving of the human heart: happiness. This is the only object of our search here on Earth. I desire and seek happiness, like everyone else. As a matter of fact, the human person was designed for happiness. But what is happiness? National and global statistics show that people associate happiness with success, whereby the latter means the achievement of a purpose. Think, for instance, of clutching at a desired promotion, buying the car of one's dreams, visiting a country of choice, meeting an adorable celebrity, chiselling one's body to the best it could ever be, marrying the most amazing person in the world, hosting a popular TV show, retiring in the most luxurious hotel, etc. Most people think that to realize their flamboyant success-dreams is to be happy. Ironically, statistics have demonstrated that the rate of sadness (lack of contentment), depression (resignation) and suicide (self-annihilation) has also increased alongside the massive access to things that are generally linked to a happy life. Hence, we are left with the same million-dollar question, "what is happiness"? Does it really entail the abundance or lack of something? Do I become happier if I have more things or if I achieve more goals? Do deprived (or materially less fortunate) people qualify as happy people and do they feel happy? If it is true that people who have little or no material 'things' are as happy as those who have checked off all their success goals, then the word must mean more than material possessions. Again, the question, 'what is happiness'?

"She (wisdom) is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy" (Proverbs 3:18)

Given that natural experience and scientific data reveal, on the one hand that, the wealthiest countries in the world have the highest percentage of "unhappy people"; whereas, on the other hand, the "happiest people" are found in the less affluent countries; therefore, happiness might not have so much to do with anything material or external. "Unhappy people" is a broad container which would include, for instance, persons who, although outwardly 'happy' (that is "having more than enough"), are inwardly sad, lonely, self-absorbed, angry, exhausted, and depressed. On the contrary, "happy people" is a generic categorization for those who, despite the fact that they are outwardly 'unhappy' (that is "not-having enough"), they blossom with inner joy, fraternity, altruistic outreach, peace, renewed energy, and liveliness. What an irony! Consequently, since happiness cannot be acquired (like a property), snatched away (from one who 'has' it), or even borrowed, then it must be something given by nature or received as a gift. It is probably something which one

is, not something that one *has*; it must have a lot, if not everything, to do with *being* ('a permanent state of existence'), not *having* ('a temporary status of life'). Hence, happiness is essentially inseparable from the Author of human nature. In other words, for it to be accurate and true, a definition of happiness must have God (or the Author of human nature) at its very centre. To shy away from the God-question or, worse still, to totally separate it from the happiness-quest is tantamount to insufficient or even total lack of self-realization in this world.

“When I found your words, I devoured them; your words were my joy, the happiness of my heart, because I bear your name, Lord, God of hosts” (Jeremiah 15:16)

Happiness is a state of union with God. Union with God signifies harmony with His plan for one's life and for humanity. It is not a passive, but rather an active level of selfless cooperation with the Creator's supernatural design. But to be in communion with God's eternal intention presupposes that one knows who God is. Hence, one might ask: Is God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, within our human reach? Indeed, He is. “For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them [...] So, they are without excuse; *for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him*” (Romans 1:19.20.21). Hence, there is no doubt whatsoever that God can be known by the natural light of reason. If true happiness consists in union with God, and the latter, in its turn, is accessible by an endowment of nature, then every human being has access to happiness. In other words, God-seeking is a positive path to genuine happiness. Yet it also goes without saying that failure or an inconsistent quest for one's Maker is a sure recipe for a restless, unfulfilling life. I have always been fascinated by the story of the conversion of a great sinner who became a saint, Augustine of Hippo. This saint spent two decades of his life seeking happiness in the wrong places. But when he eventually found what he was really looking for, he excitedly confessed: “For Thou (God) hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee”.⁴ He goes on to say the following in respect to happiness: “Joy in truth is happiness: for it is joy in You, God, who are Truth, my Light, the Salvation of my countenance and my God”.⁵ Bottomline, happiness is the fruit borne out of that encounter with God who is the Truth (as Object of our seeking), Light (which illumines mind and heart) and Salvation (as

⁴ ST. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, Book 1, I.1, (translated by F. J. SHEED, Augustine, *Confessions*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 2006), page 3.

⁵ *Ibid.* Book 10, XXIII.33, in *op. cit.*, page 208.

the supernatural End of life). St. Thomas Aquinas would define happiness as “man’s supreme Good”, namely God. The attainment and enjoyment of the last end of human life is happiness. Yet, he also differentiates between perfect (or essential) and imperfect happiness. The former cannot be attained in this life but only in heaven; whereas the latter can be achieved in this earthly life by the operation or activity of higher faculties of the human person.⁶

“My soul, you have plenty of good things laid by for many years to come; take things easy, eat, drink, have a good time”. But God said to him: “Fool! This very night the demand will be made for your soul; and this hoard of yours, whose will it be then?” (Luke 12:19-20).

Consequently, happiness can be an idol when it is temporarily or permanently detached from man’s supreme Good. If happiness is pursued as an end without reference to the uncreated Happiness that God is, then it becomes a false god for the pursuer. Besides, if happiness does not germinate from the seed of Truth, then it is fake. Again, an idol is a person or thing that is greatly admired, loved, revered, or worshipped as a deity, as if one’s existence depended on it. The evident truth is that there is a widespread cult of happiness in our world today. In every nook and cranny of modern life, one finds several temples of happiness, which are idols themselves. Think, for instance, of technological gadgets. What makes people *happier* than getting the latest smart TVs, iPhone, and the like? How about the Internet and social media – can you really be happy if you do not know what happened in the world today or what your friends said or did? Would people be happy if they spent a whole day without catching up on their favourite TV shows/series and without following their adorable celebrity? How about other temples or gods of happiness such as porn addiction, sexual disorientation, relationship dependences, fitness cravings, self-centred yoga, popularity addiction, drug enslavement, gossip urge, public opinion, superstition, etc. All these idols are fake representations of the supreme good of the human person, namely union with God.

Let me conclude by citing Jesus’ teaching on happiness. The Gospel according to St. Matthew relates eight beatitudes. The Latin Vulgate translates the Greek plural adjective “μακάριοι” as “*beati*”, which means “happy” or “blessed”. The Evangelist Matthew narrates that, “seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.² And he opened his mouth and taught them,

⁶ Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 3, a. 3.

saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:1-10).

I consider happiness the fruit of one’s spiritual state or level of communion with God and with His salvific plan for mankind in Christ Jesus by the power and working of the Holy Spirit.

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