

Commentary to the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time -C-



A few years ago I tried to explain Goth to a Trappist priest. It was almost impossible. I had stopped off at the Trappist Abbey in Conyers, GA, spent some time in the Abbey Church, and then went shopping in the Abbey Store. One of the priests was helping out. I told him that I was buying little gifts for our Teens who were going to the Steubenville Youth Conference in Atlanta. He mentioned that he had spent a weekend with his niece, and that she has two teenage sons. He couldn't understand it but they wore black all the time, including black makeup. They had razor blades hanging from their ears and all sorts of other piercings, as well as very hostile tattoos. Then he said, "I don't know why they are so angry, and I don't think they go to Church." How do you explain their anger and refusal to worship or even to be open to faith to a man who lives a life totally dedicated to prayer? How do you explain their anger to a man who can only see the joy of Christ around him? It was really all beyond his imagining, and God bless him for that.

But the rest of us are not Trappist monks with a vow a stability demanding that we never move from a monastery. We live in the world, and that world tries to tell us that happiness can be purchased, that meaning can be bought, and that all that matters is the here and now. The creed of the world is "Take care of number one." Many of the people we associate with at work, school or in the neighborhood buy into the lie of the world. This is the lie of materialism. "The more you have, the happier you will be," the false gods of materialism claim. Then reality kicks in. People can have everything, but are

not happy. The Goth movement is really not that much different than atheistic existentialism. Sarte claimed that since the present existence is all that matters, there are no valid solutions to the questions of life. Suicide is thus the only logical course of action.

This is where living for materialism will ultimately lead us. This is not the way we are called to live. Life is beautiful, when it is lived with God. That is the Good News of Jesus Christ. That is the Gospel. St. Paul tells the Colossians and us that we are to seek what is above, not what is of the earth. He reminds us that our baptism was a death with Christ to the material world and a rising with Him to the Life of the Spirit.

We have so much to live for. There is so much joy when we are whom we were created to be. Our young people who have spent time in the missions have the experience of living with people who are very poor in material goods but very rich in the Presence of the Lord. Those who have returned from retreat experiences like the Steubenville weekends, or Covecrest Camp, or Catholic leadership retreats, realize that they are at their happiest when all that matters is basking in the love of God and bringing this love to others.

We belong to Jesus Christ. He is ours, and we are His. Our patron, St. Ignatius of Antioch, wrote, "A Christian is not his own Master. His time is God's." Each of us has a crucial role to play in God's plan for mankind. We are loved, and we are called to love. The best part of all this is that nothing can take this love from us. We can only cloud it over ourselves, or even surrender it when we become concerned with what St. Paul calls the earthly practices of immorality.

With Jesus Christ there are marvelous contradictions. St. John of the Cross wrote about these paradoxes in the Ascent to God. He says, among other paradoxes, "To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing. To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing. To come to the knowledge you have not, go by a way in which you know not." Jesus Christ provides all the answers in life, but we have to empty ourselves of our attachment to the gods of materialism to even know what questions we need to ask. My favorite quote from St. John of the Cross describes the fundamental motivation of the committed Catholic: "I went without discerning to that to which my heart was yearning."

One more doctor of the Church, St. Irenaeus. Irenaeus wrote: "The Glory of God is man fully alive." Think that one out. What did he mean by that? Irenaeus meant that we are fully alive when we integrate our spiritual and physical lives into one living reality. That is the goal of our lives. God made us in His Image and Likeness. We are fully alive when our lives reflect His Work, His Creation, His Life, His Glory. The Glory of God is man fully alive.

People who live only for the here and now, live for nothing. Qoheleth called it vanity in the first reading. Jesus told a parable about a rich fool whose life ended before he could even briefly enjoy the rewards of his labor. St. Paul makes it clear in the second reading that our lives are hidden with Christ in God. That is where we find our happiness.

How does the Catholic integrate the Christ reality with the necessities of life: food, shelter, love for another, the desire to have and raise children, etc.? Everything has got to be focused on Christ. Every action must have the serving of Christ as its end. A Christian career person is successful only to the extent that he or she is able to grow closer to Christ throughout his or her working days. A marriage is successful only to the extent that each spouse can be Christ for the other. Parenting is successful only when parents are determined to populate the world with children who are even better Christians than they are. A priest is only successful to the extent that He grows closer to Christ by serving his people. And so on, and so forth.

Life for us is wonderful. We are called by Jesus Christ to follow Him. Every step we take to draw closer to Him leads us to desire Him more. We cannot have enough of Him. We cannot have enough of His joy.

The Trappist priest I spoke with could not understand the negativity of the world because He was immersed in the joy of the Lord. We don't live in a monastery. We live among many people who have reduced their joy to the momentary pleasures of life. Yet, we don't belong with them. We belong with Jesus Christ. We have been given the gift of lasting joy.

But we have not been given this gift for ourselves. All Christians are called to evangelization, to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. We are called to do this in numerous ways: invite people to Mass, to the RCIA, bring Christ's love to the poor, the hurting, the grieving. These and many other practices and works of charity are good and necessary for the Evangelist, but the easiest way to be evangelists is to be who we are: People of Joy. Joy is attractive; it attracts other people.

So we have three maxims for today from three of the great doctors of the Church. St. Irenaeus: "The Glory of God is man fully alive." St. Ignatius of Antioch: "The Christian is not his own master. His time belongs to God." And St. John of the Cross: "I went without discerning to that to which my heart was yearning." All three maxims remind us that the way of the Christian is the way of joy.

Today we pray that we might be people rich in the treasures of God. We pray that we might be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, that Jesus called us to be. We pray that we might be People of Everlasting Joy.

Fr. Joseph Pellegrino