

For a spirituality of joy

Jesús Castellano Cervera

The insistent recurrence of invitation to joy in the Gospels of the last supper surprises me (John 15,11; 16,20-21; 22,24; 17,13). This is one of the most recurring themes in the farewell speeches during the last convivial meeting of Jesus with his disciples; it is almost a psychological preparation and a loving pedagogy for what was going to happen and that, however, was not a tragic end but a dutiful passage. The sadness of the disciples, Jesus assures, will change into joy. In his intimate confidences Jesus speaks of his joy and assures us of our own joy. This is a promise, a gift; it is an invitation and an overcoming, an invitation to fullness. “May my joy be in you and may your joy be full” ¹ It is worthwhile to let us be instructed by a master who speaks of himself like this and promises such a joy as this to us.

If we reflect well, we must admit that joy is a key-word in the Christian lexicon. From the Old Testament, with the joy of God and man in creation, up to the Apocalypse, with the promise of joy without shadows, a river full of joy crosses the whole Bible, with moments of nights and darkness, but with a final victory which settles everything and anticipates the reasons for hope at every moment. Everything is said in the pages of the Bible. Joy of God for his creation so much as, seeing the beauty of the world especially of the human creature, the pupil of God, the rabbis say, dilates up to the shedding of a tear for the extreme divine joy and pleasure. Therefore, joy is interior reality and exterior manifestation.

From the beginning to its end, the Gospel of Luke is wholly a hymn of joy, such as in the greeting of the angel to Mary (“Rejoice”), in the *Magnificat*, in the good news announced to the shepherds: “I announce to you a news of great joy”, the announcement of Jesus in the Synagogue of Nazareth, in the exultance of his prayer, moved by the Holy Spirit. We can say that the entire life and preaching of Jesus are a specific *evangelion*, a joyful news of the Kingdom. ²

No reason for being happy is missing. They may be seventy or hundred thousand, as many as we want, like many sources of a unique kind of water. Perhaps the Christians are not aware of it and do not witness to such a simple reality as this, so much so as often the non-believers reprimand them for their sad faces, just as if it were not true that their faith is a source of happiness. In reality, there are also reasons to be sad, but they are always relative never definitive, because Christian hope has already defeated in advance the reasons of a definitive sadness.

Joy, Happiness, Beatitude

Today they often mention the rediscovery of beauty as expression of a necessary integration with the truth and the goodness, the two pillars or the two classically transcendent things. I debate to introduce a forth pillar, that of joy, of happiness and beatitude. Joy is an intimate desire of every person, a constant not always satisfied research, the promise of somebody who keeps on inviting us to live in joy, also amidst trials and persecutions. We must add “God is joy”.

Therefore, we need to set on the discovery of the sources and the course of God’s and man’s joy for a Christianity that may have the seal of God’s infinitely divine joy, lived and shared. After all, the great preacher Jesus himself, the Son of God, started the propaganda of his new message in the Gospel of Matthew with an invitation to happiness: the page of beatitudes, and a promise of beatitude. Blessed, therefore, happy, joyful... Sure, not at cheap price, but by setting upside down the values of joy according to the world, with an invitation to those who listen to it, namely to the poor and the unhappy of his and all times.

The Kingdom of God announced by Jesus with divine pedagogy, carries with itself, as fruit and as yeast, the experience and the promise of a holy gladness. Jesus lived a joyful experience in his freedom and sharing of everything. He created the Church of joy, where the first Christians

brought to light above all the joy and simplicity of their heart; their joy flourished from the heart in the face.

Joy has many components: luminosity of the eyes, open lightness of countenance, the strength of love expressed in words and glances, dilation of smile, the wonder of a new and gratifying feeling that benefits also the arteries, illumines the whole man, who in his turn diffuses light to others.

Anthropological reflection

Sometimes the smile bursts to become a laughter, provoked by a commitment, an acute observation, an unforeseeable saying, a mocking in the most exact sense of the world, a turning around things to discover the other side of reality, unveiling the sense of certain ridiculous attitudes, contesting a too much rational and serious way of seeing things, amplifying the horizons of thought and existence.

No doubt, smile and laughter make good blood, they say. Joy, smile and good humour are born from a good, meek and deeply human heart. They are like a creative power, which does not give in to sadness and limits; like the trial of hope that seeks more reasons and solutions, sowing gladness; in fact, it is just of the person created to the image of God to communicate, donate and share. The smile and laughter ask for truth and sincerity, as well as for bounty and a somehow harlequin beauty, like that of the clown who, being aware of his own limits as well as of those of others, snatches away smiles from children, from adults as well.

However, we must pay attention! The smile and laughter must not become an unhappy and empty grimace, and the humour must not exaggerate its tints to the end of becoming the so called *black humour*, which soon turns joy into cinder, burying it into an even deeper sadness. The superficial and morbose humour scandalises, sowing toxins of malice and malignity in the heart, upsetting the personal balance and the relation with others. This series of observations should suffice to make us understand the importance of joy, smile and good humour; to make us understand how much they are in syntony with the human and Christian vocation, how they are a gift of God and an enviable quality, how much they can contribute in changing the world, starting from transforming the face, the heart, relations and meetings of persons. However, we know also how much fragile is the balance and subtle the demarcation between *true joy* - full of bounty and beauty, coloured with good humour and with faces transfigured by a smile-, and how false is the joy that produces grimaces rather than smiles! *That produces black humour*, rather than white humour; that distils bitterness and pessimism, rather than goodness and Christian optimism.

When we look at our world, in which we find a lot of sadness and superficial joy, we are pushed to invite the Christians, the people of joy, of smile and good humour to become apostles of a new humanistic ministry, that of good humour and of Christian optimism. The Church needs to become house and school of communion in true joy, as much human as divine.

However, which place do joy and good humour occupy in a healthy spirituality? It is not difficult to find beautiful and suggestive pages on joy at theory level in books and dictionaries of even spiritual life. We could propose a specific treatise of Biblical theology of joy, as it has recently been done in two monographic volumes of the *Dictionary of Biblical and patristic spirituality*, no. 26 dedicated to the Bible, no. 27 dedicated to the Fathers of the Eastern and Western Church.³ Instead of annoying with an infinite series of Biblical and patristic quotations on joy, its causes, its sources, we want to offer over here some hints, which allow us to bring to evidence the joy of God and the human joy, as authentic experience of spirituality.

The liturgical experience

Many liturgical texts speak of joy, besides the psalms and canticles, that put feelings more than words on the lips of the faithful; feelings that moves our heart in the ineffable experience of the singing, often accompanied by beautiful melodies called *jubilus*, such as the Gregorian *Alleluia*,

a way of rejoicing and of making others rejoice, that rises and falls, rises again and launches itself, almost like an endless desire. “Joyful light”, (*Phos ilaron*”, that is “joyful light”), a light that produces joy and bliss, that generates a smile of the heart and of the lips”: this is the beginning of a hymn dedicated to Jesus out of the oldest hymns from the Byzantine liturgy, which is still sung today at sunset. We must listen to the old melody sung by our Orthodox brothers in Greece, in order to experience the true spiritual joy of invocation to Christ, at sunset and the end of the day. The songs of the old and modern church arouse joy in the hearts during the liturgical celebrations, such as those, for instance, remembered by Augustine the moment of his conversion, or by Paul Claudel, closer to us, on the day of his Baptism at the Notre Dame of Paris.

The joy of heaven on earth, this is the title of one out of the first books that Max Thurian dedicated to liturgy lived with the simplicity of pure hearts. A liturgy, lived by the monks of Taizé, that has attracted many youths, a liturgy where beauty, bounty and joy mingle with gestures, icons and songs.

The joy lived in the liturgy is taken to the earth with the experience of charity so that – according to the beautiful expression of Chrysostom -, “the earth may become heaven”, doing for Christ what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters. To carry the joy of Christ to the World, where there is a lot of sadness, is and ever actual message. For this reason the liturgy, especially that of Easter night, is full of invitations to joy, starting from the Easter Preconium, *the Exultet*, that give the “la” of a joyful and Easter tonality to Christian life, “Let the choir of angels exult, let the heavenly assembly exult, let there be a feast all over the Church...”.

A wave of bliss crosses the Easter liturgical songs of the East and the West, as well as the Easter greeting that the Christians address to one another reciprocally during the Easter season: “Christ is risen, yes He is truly risen”. This joy is renewed and prolonged every Sunday. The famous sentence of the *apostles specification is well known*, “He who is sad on Sundays commits a sin”. The victory of Christ remains is the definitive reason of Christian joy. The song of the Alleluia is emblematic for the Christians. The Alleluia is synonymous of joy sung to the Lord: it is the new song of Easter, the song of the pilgrims towards their motherland , according to the beautiful expression of Augustine, “Sing and walk”; pilgrims who share the same joy overflowing with hope, who encourage one another in their tiring looking ahead, taking one another by the hand, singing as they walk, and walking as they sing.⁴

The Christian journey is truly joyful. A Christian author of the first centuries, Eusebius from Seleucid, wrote a sentence that reveals the everlasting value of Christian spirituality, fetched from the Easter joy, “The resurrection of Jesus has turned the life of Christians into an unending feast”.⁵ This sentence, read by a Taizé monk who was afflicted by cancer and communicated to Roger Schutz, gave origin to a book, which has had a good resonance among the young pilgrims of the Taizé community: Let you feast have no end.⁶ “A feast without end”, “a sacred celebration”, “a day without sunset”: this is how the life of the Christians who believe in the Resurrection has been defined. Isn’t it a motive of joy and realism that of listening Origene say that the Christian is the space of celebration and feast? The Christian must always consider himself as a temple inhabited by God, even when he sits at a theatre, because he is the sanctuary of God.⁷

Perhaps we must go back to Easter as to an essential reference point for our Christian joy. The certainty of the resurrection of Christ is also the certainty of the victory of good over evil, of love over death: the certainty of the victory of the Father who has resurrected Jesus and has constituted him Lord. It is the guarantee of the final victory, but also of the presence of an infinite source of joy among us and in us.

J. Martin Descalzo, a Spanish author, has written a juicy booklet entitled *The reasons of joy. 70 motives to find serenity*.⁸ At the end of the booklet, he synthesises all his teaching with a consideration on the Easter season and a series of fundamental reasons starting from the resurrection of Christ as essential and definitive motives of joy. Easter is considered as a “laetissimum spatium”, a space overflowing with joy, as Tertullian states, to be celebrated during fifty days, and then every week.

Gaudete in Domino

Yes, among recent documents of the Magisterium we have a beautiful document on Christian joy promulgated by Paul VI.⁹ It was written by a Pope whose face was rather sad. Somebody with malice called him “Sad Paul”, but they perhaps had never seen the luminous eyes of the Pope and had never listened to some words of fire pronounced in given moments. This is what he said in speaking of the Holy Spirit, in a page considered to be one of the most beautiful pages on the Paraclete, “He is the animator and sanctifier of the Church, her divine breath, the wind of his veils, her unifying principle, her interior source of light and strength, her support and consolation, her source of charisma and songs, her peace and joy, her pledge and prelude of blessed and eternal life”. This text makes us rejoice from the depth of our heart and says that joy is not only a gift of the Spirit, but that the Spirit himself is joy, a source of everlasting Christian bliss.

Paul VI, in celebrating the jubilee year, wanted to donate to the Church a manifesto of Christian joy with the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, on 9th May, 1975. All that we can say about Christian joy at Biblical and theological level is written down in a happy synthesis. Joy as a characteristic expression of human nature; in fact, joy is one out of the human “passions”, namely of those feelings rich in resonance and beauty that are the most beautiful anthropological patrimony. This joy is not lessened nor obscured by the contradictions which threaten it and eliminate it, by the thousand phenomena that oppose difficulties to it. Paul VI proclaims the great truths of the Bible, the example of holy and joyful martyrs who left behind their witness of joy and good humour before their executioners, like Augustine, Francis, Bernard, Dominic, Ignatius, Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, John Bosco, Theresa of Lisieux, Maximilian Kolbe, though Francis de Sales and Philip Neri are not present at the roll call.

In the Catholic Church there is a good theology of joy rooted in the human psychology itself, in the deepest reasons of faith, of nature and grace, in the certainties that come from God’s Fatherhood, from the presence of Christ, from our life destined to glory, from the thousand joys of life sown along the streets of our day. These joys make the history of our daily life.

The spiritual experience

Does a particular consideration of joy exist in the area of spirituality? To be systematic in our considerations we must say that no Christian life exists that is not full of joy, the joy that is a fruit of the Spirit. Though often the scholars of spirituality forget to integrate it in their systematic considerations, the true spiritual authors place it at the very centre of their testimonies. Today the theme of joy and feast has come back to be a fashion. With extreme regularity, in a period when rigourism and indifference prevail in the life of the Church, the Holy Spirit arouses a new blowing of theology and spirituality of joy, a charismatic wave. This happened also during the past decades. When the north wind of secularisation swept away many things in the Church, the Holy Spirit blew some sirocco of fervour and simplicity to restore her to the balance. It is enough to think of what has happened in the Church due to the joyful expressions of the charismatic renewal. When serious theologians flood the theology with unending and heavy volumes of theology, the wisdom of the apologists, fables and narrations become fashionable again.

The theology of joy shines again in the spirituality of liberation: joy of the poor of JHWH who “quench their thirst from their own well”: it is the wisdom of life that leads to celebrate joyfully the state of creature, the faith in God the Father, hope, familiar relation with the Virgin Mary and the Saints, as it happens among the people of the so called third world, true masters of joy and of Christian simplicity. Sure, joy is a gift as well as a journey, a responsibility and a task. Some could lead us back to a kind of superficiality that would put in danger the seriousness of the cross and the ontological overcoming of sorrow and of death with the Resurrection of the Lord. For this reason we cannot forget that true joy arises from the abyss of the abandonment of Jesus on the Cross, the limit of every limit. The truest and most authentic joy is born from the generous embrace of a Crucified and Risen God.

The Saints, men and women of true, tried and authentic joy, communicators of enthusiasm and hope, are of great example for us. They are men and women of obscure nights and luminous days of the daily Christian experience. If it is true, as the well known document of Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, states in no. 1, that nothing of what is human is alien from the heart of the disciple of Christ, how can we remove joy, with its truest feelings and most human reason, from the vocabulary, the theology and spirituality of Him who spoke of joy to us and who himself is “our bliss”? ¹⁰

Notes

1. See G. FERRARO, *La gioia di Cristo nel quarto Vangelo, nelle lettere giovannee e nell'Apocalisse*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2000.
2. Cf J. CASTELLANO CERVERA, “Jubilate”, in *Unità e carismi*, 1/2000, 2-4. The entire number of the magazine is dedicated to the theme of joy.
3. DIZIONARIO DI SPIRITUALITÀ BIBLICA E PATRISTICA, *Gioia-Sofferenza-Persecuzione nella Bibbia*, n. 26, Borla, Roma 2000; IDEM, *Gioia-Sofferenza-Persecuzione nei Padri della Chiesa*, n. 27, Borla, Roma 2000.
4. Cf AGOSTINO, *Discorso* 256 1-3, PL 38, 1191-1193.
5. *Omelia pasquale*, PG 28, 1081.
6. R. SCHUTZ, *La tua festa non abbia fine*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1980.
7. Cf C. L. ROSSETTI, “Sei diventato il tempio di Dio”. *Il mistero del tempio e dell'abitazione divina negli scritti di Origene*, Gregoriana, Roma 1998, 143-173.
8. J. MARTIN DESCALZO, *Le ragioni della gioia. 70 motivi per trovare la serenità*, Gribaudi, Torino 1992.
9. Cf M. MANTOVANI, “Paolo VI, maestro e testimone della gioia”, in *Unità e carismi*, 1/2000, 23-30.
10. Cf l'udienza del mercoledì 29 novembre 1972, in *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, X, Città del Vaticano 1973, 1210-1211.

Jesús Castellano Cervera, a discalced Carmelite

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