

**Retreat for Carers in Mental Health  
Douai Abbey 30<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2014**

**Talk 2 – Christian Joy**

What does the word “Joy” mean? A dictionary gives us “vivid emotion of pleasure, gladness” and, as a second definition “rejoice, gladden”. The word comes from the Latin *gaudere*.<sup>1</sup> “Gladness” is, perhaps, the closer definition for our purposes, but I still feel that this is not quite right. Joy, in the Christian sense, is something a little different. We must ask ourselves what is the ‘ground’ of our joy.

Bernard Häring, the Moral Theologian, writes of Joy:

“Joy, rather than happiness, is the goal of life, for joy is the emotion which accompanies the fulfilment of our nature as human beings. It is based upon the experience of one’s own identity as a being of worth and dignity.”<sup>2</sup>

Joy is, then, a consequence of the experience of the fullness of our human dignity – and the dignity of the human person is grounded in the Gospel and is the root of all the Church has to say on every social and moral issue.

The final document of the Second Vatican Council, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, begins with the words *Gaudium et Spes* – Joy and Hope. This is, I believe both important and helpful, since the two are inextricably linked. What is more, Hope is one of the Evangelical Virtues, along with Faith and Love.

“Moral theology is interested not only in decisions and actions. It raises the question “What ought I to do?” but asks, first of all, “What ought I to be: what kind of person does the Lord want me to be?” Our view is that we have to become responsible and creative persons in the discipleship of Jesus Christ. So we ask ourselves the basic question, “What is the makeup of a responsible, creative person?”...The highest ideal of the disciple of Christ is to be conformed with the loving will of God. Be conformed to Jesus Christ...to conform with the action of Christ is to do for others and to be for others what Christ has done and been to us and for us.

If we look to Christ, we do not ask first what his actions were but, rather, who he was. We want to know his relationship to God and to people.

This dialogical perspective requires a dialogic character in the person. We can express it in the best traditional understanding of faith, hope love.

I see hope not only as *my* purpose and expectation but, above all, as God’s promise and my/our trustful response to it.”<sup>3</sup>

So, Christian Joy is the consequence of Hope and the recognition of our Human Dignity. When we reflect upon the needs of society and, in particular, those who live with the pain of difficulties in mental health, we will recognise that the loss of Human Dignity and the loss of Hope are very often present. Enabling the person to rediscover their dignity and be open one again to the gift of Hope will be transformative.

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<sup>1</sup> SYKES, J. (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> HARING, B., *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Vol. I, Slough, St. Paul, 1978, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> HARING, B. *Op.cit.*, pp.85-86.

This right understanding of Human Dignity, Joy and Hope is grounded in the Gospel Message – the *Evangelii Gaudium* that is the subject of Pope Francis’ Encyclical. The response to the Gospel requires, very clearly in the Holy Father’s understanding, action:

“Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. The Lord gets involved and he involves his disciples, as he kneels to wash their feet. He tells his disciples: ‘You will be blessed if you do this.’ (Jn. 13:17) An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives.”<sup>4</sup>

It is in this same paragraph of the Encyclical that we find the now famous phrase:

“Evangelizers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.”<sup>5</sup>

This requires, it seems to me, more than doing. At a recent Conference for Prison Chaplains, the subject of care for the street-dweller came up in one of the sessions. The suggestion was made that we are very good at dishing out sandwiches, but we are not always so good at sitting on the pavement and listening. In the contexts from which we have come to this gathering, that business of being with others is key. There is always the temptation to rush in, do something that makes us seem active and busy, and move on – perhaps with too much haste. The modern world encourages this and is something of which I know I am all too guilty. We are brilliant at being busy – but the path to the kind of Joy on which we are reflecting demands more. I will not get the “smell of the sheep” if I rush by the sheepfold, comment on the cuteness of the spring lambs and keep going. I have to stop and spend time. This is a vital aspect of evangelization – and it is a vital part of our response to those living with Mental Health difficulties. We must spend time. Perhaps in this field of care especially, time is important, for most mental health issues cannot be dealt with quickly. Pope Francis again:

“Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time.”<sup>6</sup>

The Holy Father then goes on to explore the Parable of the Sower – patience is needed and it is necessary to accept that not all the growth will be according to our plan:

“He or she finds a way to let the word take flesh in a particular situation and bear fruits of new life, however imperfect or incomplete these may appear.”

So, we must be careful not to impose our own agenda on others. I will desire what is right for the other, I will desire health and wholeness for that person – but it will be a slightly different health and wholeness from my own, for the other is not me and I am not them. The key here is that I must desire what is God’s will for the other.

What Pope Francis says about Evangelisation applies perfectly to any pastoral encounter: the need to walk alongside the other as they discover their dignity as a human being – only possible through the wonder of the Gospel message; to be a living example of true Joy, that the other may discover it for themselves; to walk alongside the other as they discover the person they are meant to be and to

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<sup>4</sup>EG, n. 24.

<sup>5</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> loc. cit.

find true wholeness in the one who is “the Way, the Truth and the Life”<sup>7</sup>; to be with them as they find “Life to the Full”.<sup>8</sup> Patience and time are needed for this journey. We must allow for the occasional diversion, even a blind alley or two, along the way. Being with the person in the midst of their struggle and not being tempted to look for quick-fix: this is a way that will demand very great perseverance for both accompanier and accompanied.

In our earlier time of reflection, I suggested that it would be good to reflect on the meaning of the word “Joy”. Perhaps the next focus for our reflection might be the theme of accompaniment – “the smell of the sheep”. Let us think about our own experience – the good practice that we have seen or shown and the difficult moments too. Those occasions when we have given time – those occasions when we have rushed in with what we believe to be a solution, even when it has not been the right one. What does it really mean, in our particular context, to have the “smell of the sheep”?

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<sup>7</sup> Jn. 14:6.

<sup>8</sup> Jn. 10:10.