



HAPPINESS & FREEDOM

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“How is it, then, that I seek you, Lord? Since in seeking you, my God, I seek a happy life, let me seek you so that my soul may live, for my body draws life from my soul and my soul draws life from you.”

-St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10,20

“God alone satisfies.”

-St. Thomas Aquinas

How shall we live?

In the first section on the Creed, we dealt with the question of what we are to believe; in the sacraments section, how we are to worship Him. Now in this section on morality, we answer the fundamental question how are we to live?

Man has a natural desire for happiness, and happiness is the end (purpose) of all moral action. People do or do not do certain actions because they believe in doing so they will be happy. The desire for happiness is of divine origin in order to draw man to the only One who can fulfill this desire.

Happiness or Obligation?

Throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages (following Aristotle), the moral life was understood as a response to the question of *happiness*. Law is a work of wisdom rather than as a constraint on one's freedom. However, from the 14th century onwards moral analysis focused on the *obligations* imposed by law as the expression of the divine will.

Modern man tends to think of happiness and morality as opposed to each other; to be a very moral person is akin to being a wet blanket who has no fun and is miserable. By contrast, people who are perceived as fun-loving and happy are those who appear to be free from moral constraints; this view is supported by modern cinema and Hollywood depictions of pleasure being equated with lack of restraint. But can we be truly happy without transgressing our moral obligations? Can we fulfill our moral obligations out of love and still be truly happy?

The Church's teaching is that man finds true happiness precisely by conforming to the dictates of morality. Man obeys the moral law because it makes him happy, and all men desire happiness. “But since good is the object of the will, the perfect good of a man is that which entirely satisfies his will. Consequently to desire happiness is nothing else than to desire that one's will be satisfied. And this everyone desires” (*STh* I-II, Q.5, 8).

The problem comes because people have vastly differing notions of what happiness is and by what means it can be attained.

Two Rival Conceptions: Joy vs. Pleasure

The two opposing views of happiness consist in defining happiness as either joy or as pleasure. In the modern Western world, happiness is generally conceived of as pleasure. This pleasure is usually defined as health of mind and body (Epicureanism), though some see it is simple carnal pleasure (Hedonism). This vision of happiness is ultimately contradictory to the Christian call to beatitude that Jesus offers us. But can happiness truly be reconciled with moral obligation? After all, isn't the desire for happiness an individual, self-interested, and easily egoistic feeling? Isn't it contrary to disinterested love, to self-forgetfulness, and to the generosity we normally attribute to moral worth?

The key feature to recognize is that happiness goes beyond pleasure; it is grounded in the experience of joy: "The happy life is joy born of the truth" (St Augustine). Let's look at the differences between joy and pleasure:

- Pleasure
 1. Pleasure belongs to the domain of the senses.
 2. It is an agreeable sensation, a passion caused by contact with some *exterior* good.
 3. It is *opposed to pain* as its contrary.
 4. It is *brief*, variable and superficial, like the contact that causes it.
 5. It is *individual*, like sensation itself. It decreases when the good that causes it is divided up and shared more widely.

- Joy
 1. Joy belongs directly to the moral and spiritual level.
 2. It is something *interior*, like the act that causes it; it is the direct effect of an excellent action, like the savor of a long task finally accomplished. It is also the effect in us of truth understood and goodness loved.
 3. It is *born of trials*, of pains endured, of sufferings accepted with courage and love.
 4. It is *lasting*, like the excellence, the virtues that engender it.
 5. It is *communicable*; it grows by being shared and repays sacrifices freely embraced

While a transitory happiness based on hedonistic seeking after pleasure is not compatible with a Catholic moral life, happiness defined as joy is perfectly compatible with moral excellence; it is a sign of this excellence and contributes to its perfection.

Man's Vocation to Beatitude

Beatitude is the Latin word for happiness; all men are called by God to happiness (what else is heaven but eternal happiness?). This call to happiness is of divine origin: God has placed it in the human heart in order to draw man to the One who alone can fulfill it. This desire for happiness is exemplified in the Beatitudes of Christ. The Beatitudes are at the heart of Jesus' preaching. They take up the promises made to the chosen people since Abraham. The Beatitudes fulfill the promises by ordering them no longer merely to the possession of a territory, but to the Kingdom of heaven:

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
3. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
5. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
8. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
9. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. (Matthew 5:3-12)

The Beatitudes depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray his charity. They express the vocation of the faithful associated with the glory of his Passion and Resurrection; they shed light on the actions and attitudes characteristic of the Christian life; they are the paradoxical promises that sustain hope in the midst of tribulations; they proclaim the blessings and rewards already secured, however dimly, for Christ's disciples; they have begun in the lives of the Virgin Mary and all the saints.

-CCC 1717

The Beatitudes show us the way to true happiness, which can be found only in God. Christ, following the Old Testament, teaches us that true happiness is found only in the loving fulfillment of God's will. "They are happy whose life is blameless, who follow God's law! They are happy who do His will, seeking Him with all their hearts, who never do anything evil but walk in His ways" (Ps. 119:1-3).

The way of Christ "leads to life"; a contrary way "leads to destruction" (Deut. 30:15-20). The Gospel parable of the two ways remains ever present in the catechesis of the Church; it shows the importance of moral decisions for our salvation: "There are *two ways*, the one of life, the other of death; but between the two, there is a great difference" (*Didache*).

"The beatitude we are promised confronts us with decisive moral choices. It invites us to purify our hearts of bad instincts and to seek the love of God above all else. It teaches us that true happiness is not found in riches or well-being, in human fame or power, or in any human achievement - however beneficial it may be - such as science, technology, and art, or indeed in any creature, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love" (CCC 1723).

Freedom

Man's capability of being the agent of true moral actions stems from his freedom. In this context, freedom is a very specific theological term (contrary to the broad way it is used in contemporary American culture). For the Catholic, "freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one's own responsibility. By free will one shapes one's own life. Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude" (CCC 1731).

The concept of "Free Will" means several things:

- First, this freedom proceeds from reason (by virtue of which we are made in God's image) and is thus a gift of God.
- Second, it means that by virtue of this freedom, man can exercise true control over his thoughts, deeds and the formation of his character.
- Third, because this freedom is essentially interior, it can never truly be forced or coerced. Actions may be coerced, but assent can never be coerced, *not even by God*.
- Fourth, because we are truly in control of our actions, we bear responsibility for the good of harm done by them. Unlike in the animal world, actions of man become *moral* to the extent that they are either good or evil. Thus man, by his actions, becomes worthy of praise or blame, merit or guilt.
- Finally, because God respects our freedom so totally, He allows us even the possibility of using our freedom to deny our Maker or to destroy other human lives. The Catechism calls this ability a "radical consequence" of our freedom: the possibility of using it to our own destruction.

Problem: Rival Conceptions of Freedom

Freedom of the will is one of the most misunderstood doctrines of the Catholic faith. Many interpret freedom to mean "freedom to do whatever I want," others think it means "freedom from punishment." When all of the rival ideas are sorted out, there are two fundamentally differing ideas of what freedom is: Freedom to Excellence and Freedom of Indifference, each corresponding to a different set of moral beliefs.

Freedom to Indifference is characterized by a belief in the capability of willing in the absence of all motivation, or of arbitrarily choosing anything whatever; this is moral relativism: that one choice is just as good as another and belief that the important thing is the *fact of choice* over and above what is chosen. Freedom to Excellence is defined as freedom to pursue the good. See the table below:

Two Forms of Freedom Two Types of Morality

Freedom for Excellence

Ability to act with excellence and perfection whenever one wishes in pursuit of the good.

Proceeds from reason and will and from the natural longing for truth, goodness, and happiness.

Given in germ, it develops gradually through education until it reaches maturity.

Unites one's actions in an ordered whole through a finality that ties them together interiorly. The principle end is "happiness" attained through union with the "absolute good."

Virtue is an aspect of freedom. It is the personal ability, whether acquired or infused, to act with perfection. It causes joy.

Law has an educational role in the growth of freedom. It is a work of wisdom and corresponds to one's most intimate longings.

Engenders a morality of happiness and virtue, which springs from one's interior inclinations.

Freedom of Indifference

Ability to choose between contraries.

Precedes and dominates every natural inclination. Proceeds from the will alone in its "indifference" to contraries.

It is entirely present from the beginning and in each act of the moral life.

Each free act is independent of all others. The moral life is a succession of "cases of conscience." Moral theology is a "casuistry" governed by obedience to law.

Virtue is a habit of submission to law.

Law is external to freedom, which it limits through obligation. It is the work of the pure will of the legislator.

Engenders a morality of law and obligation. The question of happiness is extrinsic to morality.

The Catechism on Freedom

1730 God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions. "God willed that man should be 'left in the hand of his own counsel,' so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him" (*Gaudium et Spes*).

Man is rational and therefore like God; he is created with free will and is master over his acts (St Irenaeus).

1731 Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one's own responsibility. By free will one shapes one's own life. Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude.

1732 As long as freedom has not bound itself definitively to its ultimate good which is God, there is the possibility of choosing between good and evil, and thus of growing in perfection or of failing and sinning. This freedom characterizes properly human acts. It is the basis of praise or blame, merit or reproach.

1733 The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to “the slavery of sin.”

1734 Freedom makes man responsible for his acts to the extent that they are voluntary. Progress in virtue, knowledge of the good, and asceticism enhance the mastery of the will over its acts.

1735 Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors.

1737 An effect can be tolerated without being willed by its agent [principle of double effect]; for instance, a mother’s exhaustion from tending her sick child. A bad effect is not imputable if it was not willed either as an end or as a means of an action, e.g., a death a person incurs in aiding someone in danger. For a bad effect to be imputable it must be foreseeable and the agent must have the possibility of avoiding it, as in the case of manslaughter caused by a drunken driver.

Conclusion

All men desire happiness and seek happiness in different ways. Our freedom is given to us by God so that we might truly and sincerely seek the good (God), which alone can satisfy all our longings for happiness. The Beatitudes preached by Christ show us the sure way to attain this happiness on earth and prepare us for the complete bliss of Heaven. Man is enabled to pursue or reject this happiness by the use or misuse of his freedom.

The Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, and the apostolic catechesis describe for us the paths that lead to the Kingdom of heaven. Sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we tread them, step by step, by everyday acts. By the working of the Word of Christ, we slowly bear fruit in the Church to the glory of God.

-CCC 1724

For Further Reading: Ps. 119:1-6; Matt. 5-7; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1691-1724, 1730-1756; St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* I-II Q. 2-5; St. Augustine, *Confessions*; *On Free Choice of the Will*; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Servais Pineckaers, O.P., *Sources of Christian Ethics*