

Franciscan Living

FRANCISCAN JOY

By Francine Gikow, SFO, Staff Editor
gikows@yahoo.com

“Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others.”²

“Franciscan Joy” is an elusive thing. We talk about it. Know when someone has it. Feel it and want it. But what is it really?

Normally, a joyful person is considered happy. But is happiness the same as joy? I think not. A person can be happy but not have joy. We might be happy when someone gives us a birthday party or we have fun doing something we like, but that is not joy. We are happy (or should be) when we have enough food on the table, meet our housing and clothing needs and have supportive and enriching relationships- that is not joy. In contrast, a person undergoing life challenging chemotherapy is not happy about their situation, but can be joyful at the same time. Happiness is contingent upon a person’s living situation. Joyfulness is not. Happiness is fleeting. Joyfulness is not.

In Francis’ story about Perfect Joy, his description surely would not be considered happiness, as Francis underwent various trials with physical suffering and humiliation. Francis answers the question of what Perfect Joy is with this response: “I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this.”³ How can that be? How can joy be found in suffering and what does Francis mean by saying “if he had patience and not become upset?”

Christ *does* come to us in suffering. He comes to us when we feel lost, forsaken and sinful...when we are open to his love. Just like the disciples were open to Him when they were locked in the upper room after the resurrection. Jesus came to them and said, “Peace be with you.”(John 20:19) The disciples were suffering at the time. They missed their friend. They felt lost and forsaken...rudderless. Then Jesus CAME! He came even though the room was locked, just like our hearts can be locked against Him at times. He came and looked at them with an immense love and said, “Peace be with you!”

Imagine the face of Jesus looking at you...knowing you in your most inmost thoughts. Loving you in spite of and because of, who you are;

Jesus looking at you with a love so immeasurable that our minds cannot understand it, but only try to accept it. Jesus’ love and peace stays with us and changes who we are and what we are.

Because we have the love of God, we have more patience when things do not go our way. Somehow, our wishes do not seem so important when we have God’s love burning in our hearts. Because of the love of God we do not become upset since we remain in God’s love. This is God’s peace.

Remember on the road to Emmaus when the disciples described their recognition of Jesus, when they said, “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way...?” (Luke 24:32)

It is like that for us as well. Christ speaks to our hearts with His love for us. Our hearts burn within ourselves too when we recognize Christ and His love within us. He shares in our life while we share in His life. Joy is the result. His joy becomes our joy. His love becomes our love. Our suffering becomes joy-filled because we are with Christ and He is with us. Everything else pales in the comparison to His love. We find joy in suffering because of His love.

This is what Franciscans mean by “Perfect Joy!” It is far from masochism. It is about love. We are joyful, because we experience God’s love in our lives and share in His suffering and resurrection. His love and joy fill us so completely that they bubble over into joy shared with others. As St. Francis wrote directly to us in the Letter to the Faithful (1,5): “*O happy and blessed are these men and women while they do such things and persevere in doing them, because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them and make Its home and dwelling place among them...*”

Not only do we have Jesus with us, but we are assured that the Spirit will “make Its home and dwelling place among (us).” The Spirit stays with us permanently as long as we cooperate with grace. We are filled more and more with Christ’s love and therefore His joy!

Joy is not only a fruit of God’s grace, but it is joined with peace, a feeling of contentment no matter what happens to us, for we are beloved by God. Joy can also be a decision, when we decide over and over again to remember Christ’s love and share it with others. As Secular Franciscans, we choose to be joy filled people because we are lovers of God and in this way we bring hope to others.

² Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, Chap. II, 19.

³ All quotes from St. Francis taken from: *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, The Saint*. Ed. By R. Armstrong et al. New York: New City Press, 1999.