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*The* FURROW

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*Kevin Egan*

When There is  
no Joy

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# When There is no Joy

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Kevin Egan

I confess to being reluctant to write or talk about joy. Recently I was asked to give a lecture at the autumn conference of priests from the diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois. The theme of the conference was “Give me Joy in my Heart.” I have been struck by the fact that Pope Francis frequently makes reference to *joy*. I began my research by consulting his writings. I found my title in a phrase he used during an address to clergy, religious and permanent deacons delivered at the Cathedral of Naples on March 21, 2015. In his address he used a phrase which set me thinking: “When there is no joy something is wrong.”<sup>1</sup> I began to ask myself a series of questions: What might be wrong? What contributes to the absence of joy in priests? What does Pope Francis mean by joy?

I like to work from an interdisciplinary perspective and so I asked myself: what have psychologists to say about joy? What is different about their understanding of joy and a theological understanding? George Valliant, a development psychologist, draws a distinction between joy and happiness. Happiness is far easier to talk about whereas joy is difficult to talk about. It can feel too intense, too private. He describes joy as a primary emotion. It is spiritual and has greater depth than happiness. He notes that there is a world of difference between the joy experienced by the disciples after the ascension as they returned to Jerusalem “full of joy” (Lk 24: 52) and the happiness we feel flying home from a memorable holiday.<sup>2</sup>

Both joy and happiness are by-products experienced by people who are aiming for something else. For this reason, there is a surprise

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1 Pope Francis, *With the smell of the sheep: The Pope speaks to priests, bishops and other shepherds*, New York: Orbis Books 2017, 78.

2 George E. Valliant, *Spiritual Evolution: A Scientific Defence of Faith*, New York: Broadway Books 2008, 124.

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element to them. “Joy is not produced because others praise you. Joy emanates unbidden and unforced. Joy comes as a gift when you least expect it.”<sup>3</sup> While we cannot make them happen, joy and happiness are connected to certain actions or ways of being, for example, a well lived life. The Greek philosophers recognized this when they invented a special kind of word to describe the experience – *eudaimonia*- which translated means something like a ‘life well lived.’ Christian theologians later understood this to mean a life of virtue.<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis in his treatment of joy grounds it in human experience while emphasizing that its source is divine. In his address to priests in St. Peter’s Basilica on Holy Thursday, April 17, 2014, he describes three significant features of priestly joy:

It is a joy that *anoints us* (not one that “greases” us, making us unctuous, sumptuous, and presumptuous), it is a joy that is *imperishable*, and it is a *missionary* joy that spreads and attracts.<sup>5</sup>

The phrasing inside the brackets sound like words from a rap-song making his point all the more memorable. Francis emphasizes the *missionary* dimension of joy. It is linked to the activity of going out and evangelizing. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he frequently makes reference to Pope Paul’s document *Evangelii Nuntiandi* which also speaks of the joy experienced by the one who evangelizes. In the words of Francis “an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral.”<sup>6</sup> It is to be expected that joy would be linked to the experience of proclaiming the Gospel since the Gospel in its essence is *Good News*. Going out to encounter the other is an exercise in self-transcendence. Much of the recent research on happiness highlights that it is frequently linked to acts of self-transcendence. What lessons can be drawn for priestly ministry? If people today complain of seldom meeting a happy or joyful priest, could it be that the missionary outreach to others is absent from his life? Could it be that he has lost confidence in the power of the Gospel?

In stressing the importance of proclaiming the Gospel with a joy that is experiential and evident for all to see, Pope Francis is emphasizing the affective dimension and not just the intellectual or cognitive dimension of proclaiming the Gospel.<sup>7</sup> He obviously

3 David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, London: Allen Lane 2015, 270.

4 Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, London: Harper Press 2006, 36.

5 Pope Francis, *With the Smell of the Sheep*, 9.

6 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Dublin: Veritas 2013, No 10.

7 Allan Figueroa Deck, *Francis, Bishop of Rome: The Gospel for the Third Millennium*, Mahwah, NJ.: 2015, 91.

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speaks from personal experience when he points to the fact that “the best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us.”<sup>8</sup> However, Pope Francis is a realist. He is well aware that prayerful contemplation is not enough, one also needs to develop “a spiritual taste for being close to people’s lives and to discover that this is itself a source of greater joy.”<sup>9</sup> When priests lack the spiritual (pastoral) sense that leads them to draw close to people then they have lost touch with a source of great joy. I like to think that Francis is speaking from personal experience when he claims that joy is to be found in experiencing a pastoral connection with people.

### WHERE DO YOU FIND JOY?

Sometimes the simplest of questions are often the most profound. I often pose this question in workshops on spirituality or with clients in therapy. I don’t expect an immediate response for it is one of those questions that demands reflection and this may not be a familiar practice for many. The question is also based on the presupposition that one does experience joy. The joy I refer to is a *quiet* joy as distinct from a *bubbly* joy. It frequently is experienced in connection with one’s work but not always so. It is often a by-product of another experience such as a sense of gratitude for blessings received: “Joy springs from a grateful heart.”<sup>10</sup> Joy is sometimes encountered in the midst of a religious experience. C. J Lewis wrote a book describing a religious experience and entitled it *Surprised by Joy*. Such experiences are *graced* experiences in the sense they are not within our own power to induce.

In the light of all that has been said I hope you’ll agree that it is entirely appropriate to ask priests where do they experience joy in their work? I have consulted the research on this topic to discover that, not surprisingly, the question is often phrased somewhat differently. In 2009 Stephen Rosetti asked priests how happy they were with their lives as priests and 61% described themselves as very happy and 36% as pretty happy. In a commentary on these figures he says that we shouldn’t be surprised with the high percentages as a career spent in service to others tends to make people happy.<sup>11</sup> Further research into the sources of happiness in priestly life highlight service, meaning and community. Priests were asked to specify the sources of their happiness and joy

8 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Dublin: Veritas 2013 no 264.

9 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No 268.

10 Pope Francis, *With the Smell of the Sheep*, 109.

11 Stephen Rossetti, *The Priesthood: Today and Tomorrow*. Origins Vol. 40, No 44, 2011, 720.

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satisfaction; 94% of priests say that the joy of administering the sacraments and presiding over the liturgy is the greatest source of satisfaction, 83% mentioned preaching the Word, followed by 76% who named being part of a community of Christians who are working together to share the Good News of the Gospel.<sup>12</sup> This research was carried out in the United States where liturgies are generally well attended and have a high level of lay involvement. I would not expect comparable figures in Ireland though the sources of satisfaction may be similar. It is one thing for priests to name in a survey their sources of satisfaction. I wonder would they have the experience of talking with one another about those sources of satisfaction? Putting words on our experience helps to make it real, and sharing it with others validates the experience. I offer the view that while priests do experience happiness and joy in their work the experience may not be that real for them because they seldom talk about it.

### WHAT TAKES AWAY JOY?

When Pope Francis talks about joy he treats of it in experiential terms. It is something deeper than happiness. It is a gift. It is characteristic of the disciples of the risen Lord. It is to be found in going out to others and being close to them. He points out that when there is no joy something is wrong. This leads me to pose the question: what may be wrong? I find it helpful to first name some of the external reasons as to why there may be no joy and then to proceed to the internal reasons. I begin with a piece of advice attributed to the broadcaster and journalist the late Gerry Ryan. He shared it with his friend Fr. Brian D'Arcy during the height of the clergy sexual abuse crisis. "Don't let them take away your joy" he said. He assumes that people can take away our joy. I think he is right. He also assumes that we can stop them. Again, he is right. Now the intriguing question: who might *them* refer to? The first answer that comes to mind is the media, both of them worked in the media. While this may be the most obvious answer, it would be a mistake to assume that it is the media he is referring to. There is no shortage of priests in Ireland who would readily blame the media for taking away their joy. I don't wish to get into the topic of the media and the Catholic church. Suffice it to say that when there is no joy a few things are wrong. It seldom comes down to one thing.

It is worthwhile listening to Pope Francis on this topic. Among the sources he mentions that take away joy are: gossip, pastoral

<sup>12</sup> Mary L. Gautier, Paul M. Perl and Stephen J. Fichter. *Same Call, Different Men: The Evolution of the Priesthood since Vatican II*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press 2012, 33.

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acedia, narcissism and lifestyle. The first of these is “external” and all the others are “internal.” In his address to the clergy in Naples, which I have already referred to, he has some harsh words to say about gossip describing it as “a form of terrorism” that disrupts fraternal and community life.<sup>13</sup> Joy has a communal dimension and whatever disrupts community undermines joy. He has harsh words to say about the practice of gossip attributing it to a celibate life lived in sterility. “A lonely man ends up embittered, he is not fruitful and gossips about others.”<sup>14</sup> From this perspective gossip not only undermines joy but is the consequence of the absence of joy.

In Chapter Two of *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis names what he considers temptations faced by pastoral workers. The consequence of each one is to remove joy from the heart of the pastoral worker. He uses the term “pastoral acedia” to describe a state characterized by an excess of activity undertaken without a spirituality and resulting in a tense tiredness and unbearable fatigue.<sup>15</sup> This is where the joy and satisfaction that should normally be associated with work is absent and frequently results in burnout. In this situation where there is no joy something is wrong. We should be careful about blaming the victim for such a state of affairs. There are other contributing factors such as the system which has loaded him with a multiplicity of roles and inadequate resources to meet them. According to Pope Francis pastoral acedia can be caused by a number of things. Some fall into it because they “throw themselves into unrealistic projects and are not satisfied by what they can reasonably do.”<sup>16</sup> Sometimes the source of the unrealistic projects is not the minister but the diocese. I would recommend Pope Francis take a more systemic look at the sources of pastoral acedia.

If one is to explore why joy is absent from someone’s life one obvious place to look is lifestyle. Pope Francis refers to this in words I find difficult to understand. He uses the term “pastoral relativism.”<sup>17</sup> He seems to be referring to a self-outside-God life style. One engages in ministry as if God did not exist. One sets one’s goals without consulting the people or taking cognizance of the poor. If I go about my work as if everything depended on me alone I am doomed to failure and exhaustion. It is only when I realize that I am involved in something greater than myself that I will be open to experience the gift of joy.

13 Pope Francis, *With the smell of the sheep*, 78.

14 Pope Francis, *With the smell of the sheep*, 64.

15 Pope Francis, ‘*Evangelii Gaudium*’, No 82.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

Francis frequently draws on psychological language to describe the human condition. He warns against narcissism in the life of disciples and regards it as not just an individual trait but characteristic of the clerical culture.<sup>18</sup> The narcissist is incapable of experiencing joy in the Christian understanding of the term. Since they are self-obsessed with their own need, the self-transcendence that leads to joy eludes them. This is the plight of the narcissist. Narcissism exists on a continuum. A certain amount is necessary to function effectively and everyone of us exhibits narcissistic behaviour. The self-grandiosity that is the cornerstone of excessive narcissism precludes an empathic connection with the suffering of others. It is precisely this connection that is the source of joy experienced by ministers and those in the caring professions. Paradoxically some narcissistic individuals are attracted to ministries, particularly those involving high visibility and leadership responsibility.<sup>19</sup>

As I explore the reasons why we fail to experience joy in our lives, I am conscious that there are conditions that impact greatly on our ability to experience joy and they have nothing to do with any fault on our part. I once was very ill for a long period of time during which it was a struggle to get through each day. I have no recollection of feeling joy during that period. The absence of joy is symptomatic of certain mental conditions such as depression. Intense grief lasting for a long period of time is frequently characterized by an absence of joy. When there is no joy something may be wrong and we may need to call on the help of a health care professional to address it.

#### WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO JOY?

At this stage in our exploration we have seen how an absence of joy is sometimes related to an imbalance in life style. Obviously, a balanced lifestyle increases our chances of experiencing joy. Not unconnected to lifestyle is the living of a moral life. Daniel Gilbert in his book *Stumbling On Happiness* makes reference to *moral happiness*. For the Greek philosophers happiness is the reward of living a life of virtue. It is connected to living one's life in a proper, moral, deep and meaningful way.<sup>20</sup> For many the living of a moral life is linked to a sense of duty. For people in the caring professions I think it is also linked to a sense of calling. A calling is a sense that one is on this earth for a reason, that one has a destiny no matter how great or small. It gives rise to an intuition that life wants or asks something of us. This sense of calling functions as both a sustaining and motivating force in our lives and can contribute greatly to a

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Len Sperry, 'The Narcissistic Minister', *Human Development*, Vol 16, No 3. 1995, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, London: Harper Press, 2006, 36.

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quiet sense of inner joy. David Brooks in his book *The Road to Character* draws a distinction between *résumé* virtues and *eulogy* virtues. The *résumé* virtues are the ones you mention on a CV, the *eulogy* virtues are deeper and more important. Those who possess such virtues don't boast about them but others do notice them. David Brooks confesses to being impressed by people who possess an inner cohesion. "They have achieved inner integration. They are calm, settled, and rooted. They are not blown off course by storms. They don't crumble in adversity. Their minds are consistent and their hearts are dependable." He goes on to add that they radiate "a sort of moral joy."<sup>21</sup> I welcome this emphasis linking joy and happiness with the moral life. As a therapist I frequently review with clients what went wrong in their life? What has led to the absence of joy? It often comes down to the fact that they "messed up" in some way. For them the road to healing and recovery will come about through reconstituting the moral dimension of their lives; trying to bring about some greater congruence between the person they proclaim to be and the person they are.

I am grateful to those who in the first place asked me to explore this topic. I can now say I have come to a deeper understanding of what Christian joy might involve. I have a sense of what contributes to such joy and what undermines it. Priests invest a large portion of their lives in serving others. It is important that they reflect on their lives and come to know what gives them joy and what takes it away. At the conclusion of this lecture I asked the participants to complete the sentence: *I get joy from . . .* Perhaps this might be a fruitful exercise for you to engage in as you come to the end of this article.

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21 David Brooks. *The Road to Character*, London: Allen Lane 2005, xiv.