

The Return of Christian Joy

7/5/12

Recently, Pope Benedict—overlooking the mass exodus from the Church due to disgust with the collapse of the bishops' moral authority following the priest sex scandal—has instituted an Evangelization Commission to encourage the remaining faithful to bring the Gospel and the faith to the world and to encourage new members to join the Church.

Can an evangelization effort ever succeed in today's Church, cursed with an untrustworthy and discredited leadership—a Church with no joy? No, under these circumstances, this evangelization effort is dead on arrival.

Let us examine, then, the absence of that crucial Christian joy which brings life to the hearts of the faithful. We turn for our model of essential Christianity to the ancient Church, as it is depicted in contemporary documents. And we compare (to be precise, we contrast) the Church of our day with the ancient Church, hoping to discover the answer to our question: What happened to the joy?

I think we will discover that the answer is that the joy of the community was suppressed by an overly burdensome institutional structure. But the joy was not crushed. The faithful retreated from the main body of the community into small gatherings, in which the joy could be expressed freely. And in times of institutional severity, the faithful turned the joy inward to protect it. In those times, joy then became an individual rather than a communal experience in the Catholic Church and cloaked itself with the title “mysticism.” This title was arcane enough that those who wore it were looked upon as “unworthy of this world, living in caves and holes in the ground.” They could be ignored as no threat by the decision-makers and bureaucrats of the institutional Church, who neither understood what the mystics had nor desired to pursue it. Their interests were elsewhere: in purveying the “truth,” and in the pursuit of power and riches.

So we begin our analysis with the ancient Church. The ancient Church was a missionary church. The disciples of Jesus burst open the doors of the Upper Room on Pentecost day with carefree enthusiasm. They had a wonderful, inspiring, transformational message. The Jesus who was executed on Calvary Hill had resumed life in a new form—the Eternal Life of the Kingdom

of God. Jesus was from God—the long-awaited Messiah—and Jesus was of God. The power of his Resurrection left no doubt. And his disciples had witnessed this and now testified to the truth of this message. Furthermore, this same Jesus had endured death as the final and perfect *Torah* sacrifice—once for all, for the forgiveness of the sins of all. His resurrection substantiated this and testified to God’s promise that we also—those who recognize Jesus as Lord, and follow him—will be offered the same destiny: eternal resurrected Life, following a life of loving sacrifice of self.

The message itself is supercharged. It offers hope and eternal life to all humanity. But it is also fraught with danger. It denies the power of death in human experience, and it seems to challenge the long-standing expectations of Judaism. It is no wonder the disciples hid in the Upper Room in fear—until the power and positive joy of the Holy Spirit of God expelled the disciples through that door.

The proclamation of the Good News by these first joyful missionaries was a haphazard affair. They spread outward from Jerusalem into the surrounding cities, and then into the cities farther out. The disciples travelled in small groups of evangelizers, forming small Christian house-church communities as they went, instructing the neophytes over a period of months, and appointing presiders to conduct the ceremonies, principally baptism and the Breaking of the Bread.

As time passed (we know from Paul’s letters) these missionary groups grew in number as more and more preachers and prophets of Christianity took to the roads. The situation became confused as the mainstream teachings of the original Apostles began to be subverted by inauthentic or incomplete messages.

At this point, the Christian Church was an assemblage of these individual house-churches, often one per city, each celebrating the essential rites, but holding a belief-set that was constantly in flux because of the natural and well-intentioned desire of the faithful to understand and to be certain.

This is to say that the problem of maintaining the orthodox teachings of Jesus plagued the Church from the beginning.

However, to see the ancient Church as a collection of “believers” struggling to understand what Jesus brought misses a crucial question: What impelled these people to pursue Christ in this atmosphere of confusion, of the isolation of individual local churches, of the dangers and pitfalls of missionizing, and too quickly, of the attempts of the established power elite to suppress the movement?

The theological answer, of course, is that the Holy Spirit of God moved them by grace. But in human terms, how did that grace manifest itself in those subject to it? What was it about the experience of being a Christian that motivated these people to endure—and to suffer—the costs of Christianity?

When we read the early documents closely, there seem to be two experiential reasons for enduring as a Christian, even in times of persecution. The first is the immediacy of the communal experience of the Presence of Jesus, and the second is a shared joy within the community.

The experience of the Presence of Jesus apparently varied among the communities. Surely, the Eucharist was treasured as the Living Presence of Jesus in all the communities. That experience itself was surely enough to bring solidarity in faith to every member of each community. The power of the Road to Emmaus story surely reflects this universal ancient Christian experience, even when it was abused, as in Paul’s condemnation of the Sacred Meal practices of the Corinthians (1Cor. 11:17ff.) For, the community (-ies) which Peter addressed in 1Peter 1:8ff. must surely have found the well-spring of their love for Jesus in the Breaking of the Bread, even though none of the members had ever seen Jesus or been in his physical presence.

But Paul’s companion, Luke, reports in *Acts* that “Many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles” (5:12), and that is certainly true of Paul’s ministry. In Paul’s letters, we are intrigued to find suggestions of additional communal experiences of Jesus—what might be called “group mysticism.” In several of his letters, Paul suggests that his own evangelical presentation of Jesus to those to whom he had preached was accompanied by unusual visual experiences. For Paul, conversion was accompanied by “deeds of power” on God’s part (Acts 10:44-46. See a parallel in *Acts* when a group of listeners to Peter’s preaching is gripped by the power of the Spirit and falls into glossolalia, even before they are baptized. This surprises Peter.) Paul felt no surprise when his preaching was verified by

wondrous works, for as far as Paul was concerned, the gospel message was not about words—not about theology; it was about power, the God-given power of the Spirit that changes lives to receive the New Life (cf. 1Cor 4:20).

Consider these passages from the New American Bible translation of Paul's letters:

- For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction. (1Thess 1:5.)
- I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a *demonstration* of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1Cor 2:3-5; emphasis added.)
- Therefore, I tell you that nobody *speaking by the spirit of God* says “Jesus be accursed.” And no one can say, “Jesus is Lord, except by the holy Spirit.” (1Cor 12:3; then comes a list of the charismatic gifts of the Spirit (1Cor 12:4-11)).
- For I will not dare to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to lead the Gentiles to obedience by word and deed, *by the power of signs and wonders*, by the power of the Spirit of God . . . (Rom 15:18-19; emphasis added.)
- (In defense of his own apostleship, Paul writes:) The signs of an apostle were performed among you with all endurance, signs and wonders, and mighty deeds. (2Cor. 12:12. The NAB note says: Despite weakness and affliction . . . , his ministry has been accompanied by demonstrations of power. **Signs of an apostle:** visible proof of belonging to Christ and of mediating Christ's power, which the opponents require as touchstones of apostleship.)
- O stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, *before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?* . . . Did you experience so many things in vain?—if indeed it was in vain. Does, then, the one who supplies the Spirit to you and works mighty deeds among you do so from works of the law or from faith in what you heard? (Gal 3:1,4-5; emphasis added.)

From these passages, it seems clear that when Paul preached—meekly, as he says—, those who heard and believed experienced the Presence of Jesus and other spiritual phenomena as signs of the power of God endorsing Paul’s gospel message. These wondrous signs produced awe and joy in the spirits of those who experienced them.

But in addition, the witnesses of these works of power were not simply observers of the deeds of the Spirit, they were active participants in them. In 1Cor 12, Paul lists (some of) the spiritual gifts that the Spirit blessed the Corinthian community with. In his discussion of these gifts in chapters 12-14, Paul takes as a given that the members of the community are individually familiar with these gifts, and that the community shares them with one another.

These gifts, whenever they are associated with a Christian community in the Scriptures, bring a joyful and reverent spirit to the community members who share in the gifts. This joy—and the loving spirit it springs from—is a defining characteristic of a vital Christian community. In the present day, as in the ancient Church, a community which shares the experience of the Presence of Jesus and is filled with the enthusiasm of the Holy Spirit, joins in joyful worship of God and leads lives of loving care for one another. The joy-filled love of a Christian community, expressing itself in caring for the poor and needy, without gain for themselves, *is* the presence of the Spirit of God.

These gifts of the Spirit—most prominently, though not most importantly, glossolalia—were clearest and strongest in the halcyon days of the infant Church. As the gospel message spread and the number of communities grew, it seemed best to the leaders of the time to give structure and stability to the communities individually, and to the Church as a unified whole, that is, to institutionalize the Body of Christ.

As a result, the original function of presider at the Eucharistic meal—the overseer and custodian of the individual community—was supplemented by other ranks of servant-officials: deacons, elders/presbyters, porters, exorcists, and so on. The function of these officials was to protect the community (to the extent possible) from malevolent political and spiritual forces, to preserve the original teachings of Jesus (the “traditions” as Paul call them, 1Cor 11:2), to conduct and to guide the spiritual practice of the community, to distribute the resources of the community to its needy members, and to encourage the members in times of persecution.

As time went on, the overseers (*episkopoi* in Greek) of individual communities extended their authority, and so a “local church” became a territorial entity, a diocese, comprising several or many individual communities gathering in different settings. The diocese was controlled by a bishop. (Greek *epi-skop-oi* was taken into English as *bi* (*epi* reduced to *bi*) – *shop* (a variation of *skop*) – *as*. Thus, eventually, English *bishops*.)

The presiders at worship in each of the individual church communities in the diocese was a designee of the bishop, a *priest*, empowered to exercise many of the bishop’s sacramental functions. The bishops (and priests) were also assisted by another order of episcopal appointees, the *deacons*.

As this organization of personnel was occurring, so too was the stabilization of ritual practice (at least on the diocesan level) and in regional bishops’ conferences, the constructing of creedal statements and the designation of canonical Christian scriptures.

In these ways, in the second and third centuries, the Church transformed itself into a structured organization.

However, it did not escape the attention of those who were more interested in the presence of the Divine Spirit than in the organizational structure that during this same period, the charismatic gifts that had characterized many of the earliest Christian communities had all but disappeared in the worship practices of the local communities. At the time, the commentators said that the gifts were no longer needed for the preaching of the gospel. In hindsight, however, as we will see in a moment, it is clear that the structuring of the Church drained the enthusiastic life of joy from it.

As the centuries passed, this trend toward stability and reasoned order in the Roman Church continued. Rome, the center of the political empire, came to be also the authoritative diocese in the Christian Church. It is claimed that the reason for this is that Simon Peter came to be the first bishop of Rome. However, the historical record is not clear about how often Peter came to Rome or how long he stayed. It appears that he may have visited Rome frequently rather than resided there. It is also unclear whether he acted as overseer of the local Church there.

Moreover, it is unclear to what extent Peter was actually considered by his contemporaries in the faith the authoritative leader of the Church. Nowhere in the gospels does Peter appear to act in that capacity. The famous giving to Peter of the power of binding and loosing in Mt 16:18-19 proves little since Jesus gives that same power to all the disciples in Mt 18:18. And Jesus' calling Peter the "rock" on which his Church is to be built designates Peter, with his strong love of Jesus and his recognition of Jesus' divine ordination, as the *foundation* of the Church, not necessarily its leader.

It is true that Peter often speaks first in the gospels, but he never acts as *ex cathedra* spokesperson for the Church, either in the gospels nor in *Acts*. If anything, Peter's role in *Acts* is prophet rather than administrative head. In *Acts* we find the accounts of Peter's coming to terms with the universality of (in Paul's words) the Body of Christ (e.g., the conversion of Cornelius, and Peter's disregard of the kosher laws in Antioch) and with the power of the Spirit flowing through him (e.g., the healing power of his shadow, his healing of the crippled beggar, the raising of Tabitha from death, even the dooming to death of Ananias and Sapphira.) Nowhere does he speak as leader. In fact, in the "Council of Jerusalem," Peter's opinion is considered, but it is James's view that wins the day.

Whatever the reasons, nonetheless, by the time of the legalization of Christianity in the early fourth century, the bishop of Rome was authoritative in the Western Church. And when Christianity was able to participate in the open life of the society, bishops and popes began to gather to themselves political power (and wealth), as well as power in the institutional Church. And for the next sixteen hundred years, the Church has continued to grow more complex, and its leaders have continued to believe that they have the authoritative view on every moral and theological issue and that the institutional Church must be respected and defended at all costs.

But we must bear in mind that the institutional Church is not in itself the spiritual way which Jesus taught his disciples. That spiritual way, that fervent community living in the Presence of Jesus the Lord, and alive with joy and self-surrender, is what we know as the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ *is* Christ acting in the world through the faith and love of his disciples in every age. The Body of Christ is a spiritual entity which glorifies God by sharing the sacred meal of the Eucharist and every other sacrament given to it by Jesus.

In the beginning, the Body of Christ was housed in the motley assemblies of the original communities, with little formal structure but with much heart. As the institutional Church developed, it became the structure that housed the Body of Christ, and, truth be told, functioned as a strong wall of brass to protect the “sacred mysteries.” But during the same time, the increasing burden of elaborate ceremonies, the dreadful morbidity of Jansenist sin-guilt, in which we see ourselves always as “steeped in sin,” and the endless multiplication of rules and laws, not to mention the squabbles over power and wealth, smothered the joyful Spirit which enlivened the ancient communities and turned those Christian communities from spontaneous joy to the drudgery of following the institutional rules and of feeling the guilt of sin when one failed to follow the rules.

But the Spirit cannot be confined. Over the centuries, the Spirit has found havens among the faithful open to joy. At first, there were the hermits in the Egyptian desert. Later there were the monastic orders—the monks and convented sisters. Later still came the mendicant orders, most notably the followers of Francis of Assisi. Then the mystics of the high Middle Ages appeared. Then, at the beginning of the 20th Century, the Spirit infused the Christian laity with the gift of Joy, first in the evangelical and Pentecostal denominations, and then in the 1970s and 1980s in the Catholic Charismatic Movement.

This Charismatic/Pentecostal movement of the 20th Century shows the original explanation for the cessation of the Spirit’s gift of Joy in the early communities to be false. It is not that the Spirit withdrew the gift of Joy because it was no longer needed. Joy was withdrawn because it was ignored. Now, in these Charismatic communities the Spirit’s work was shown to be what it always has been: not primarily to impel people to “hit the streets” and evangelize, but rather, to fill the faithful people with the joyful love of the Lord. The infectious nature of this joy on its own draws new believers to the faith, just as it had on the first Pentecost.

Live your faith life with joy and kindness, and others will be attracted to your faith. Live your life in constant anxiety about following the rules, and your faith is lifeless and unattractive.

Charismatic worshippers know that the reverence and joy of liturgy celebrated with open hearts is the experience of the living God and the gift that Jesus came among us to share with us.

When the Catholic Charismatic movement sprang up with lively energy in the 1970s, its adherents believed that they were living again the Spirit-filled Christian life of the ancient Church—a Christianity alive with love, and importantly, conforming to the orthodox teachings of the Catholic Church. They believed that the Holy Spirit had given them the charisms to be exercised before the entire Church community, as an invitation to all the faithful to renew within themselves the original Christian mode of joyful, Spirit-filled worship which had sustained the ancient Church during its times of persecution.

In brief, they believed that the whole Catholic Church was being revived by a joyful Spirit, and they expected the hierarchy to embrace the Charismatic way as the preferred way of Catholic worship. Pope John XXIII had just fifteen years before said, “Let’s open the windows and let fresh air into the Church,” and the Second Vatican Council had just concluded, having promulgated liturgical teachings which set the stage for the Catholic Church to be re-invigorated by the charisms of the Spirit.

It was a heady time, in which the people in the pews during Charismatic worship were enlivened in a way not seen since the first century by the Spirit of Christ acting powerfully among them, working “deeds of power” with “signs and wonders.”

But the Church hierarchy was not enthused. Though Pope Paul VI made a long-awaited statement affirming that Charismatic worship was a legitimate form of Catholic worship, the Charismatic way of life was never endorsed nor embraced by the bishops. Because of the Pope’s statement, many dioceses opened offices of Charismatic worship. In other words, the Charismatic life was seen as just one of many expressions of Catholic faith. The result was that Charismatic worship was consigned to bureaucratic limbo, and the mainstream Church viewed it as the odd, “holy roller” fringe group of the Catholic community.

As for the Charismatics themselves, it is interesting that their haphazard groups followed a course similar to the course followed by the ancient Church: they began to structure themselves. For example, “covenant communities” came into existence, offering to organize individual Charismatic groups around a central leadership, a common set of teachings or interpretations of Christian faith, and a shared set of core values. The individual Charismatic groups became “branches” of the larger Covenant Communities. To my knowledge, most of the active Charismatic groups in this country are attached to these larger structures, or else

individual local groups of Charismatics struggle along, meeting in homes or parish meeting rooms to worship. In any event, the members of these groups—mostly the remnants of the original movement, rarely young—continue to age and to become feeble. Most groups will not outlive their original members.

Now, the joyful Spirit has moved on and perhaps found its most recent home in the *taize* movement. Here the joy is expressed by the worshippers in a more refined, less raucous, more reverential atmosphere. Nonetheless, the joy continues to have a home and an expression.

At the same time, that is, at this present time, Catholics are experiencing a “conservatization” of the joyful freedom opened to the Body of Christ by the Second Vatican Council. The institutional Church leadership in the Vatican are tightening their grip on the way the Liturgy is celebrated in the local churches. Local liturgies reflecting local cultural practices (indigenous music, dance, and variation of the ritual) were suppressed quite early. And the joy of the people which these new liturgies expressed had to be channeled by the people in other directions. The recent official revision of the English translation of the Roman missal has dampened what joy the people had previously experienced at Mass because of turgid, incomprehensible language.

Where has the joy gone, then, in the current era? The joy, of course, cannot be suppressed because this joy is the Holy Spirit giving expression among us to the Divine Love. The joy is still among us, though many Catholics have had to leave the Catholic Church to find the joy in evangelical and Pentecostal churches. The joy in the Spirit is still to be found also in the Catholic parishes in which people of color predominate. The traditional worship modes of the Black community, especially in its musical expression, continue to live in minority Catholic parishes. Indeed, even in white suburban parishes with strong, contemporary music ministries, the joy continues to be shared among the members of the community.

But today, for the rest of us, either we have watched the languishing death of Christian joy in our rule-riddled parishes, with pastors acting more like accountants than spiritual leaders. Or we have gathered the joy into ourselves. We do not share it with others in the community. We experience the joy during private prayer, and even the Sunday Liturgy—expected to be a community celebration—becomes for those who are inwardly joyful, a private experience. The joy is felt secretly and personally in the heart. But in the silence at Mass and in its formalized

verbal structures, this joy is never expressed publicly. We hold the Lord in our hearts, treasuring his presence, deeply joyful in his love. But that joy remains deeply submerged and never comes to be expressed in the presence of others.

For some of us, this joy is understood to be a personal mystical union with the Lord in our hearts. It is a deep silent experience, very personal, enriching, and heart-felt. But for many others who have no pretensions and do not understand the word *mysticism*, this joy is simply prayer. It is “my love of Jesus” alive in my heart.

These earnest, faithful people have Christ close in their hearts, the only place remaining to them, when joyful communal worship is inaccessible to them—if they have ever desired it or known that it is potentially there every moment. Their faith is not empty of heart; it is full within them. But it is silent and private.

Come, Holy Spirit. Break for us the shackles that restrain our hearts, and let joyful worship once again open our hearts without restraint to the embrace of the loving—and joyful—Lord.

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