

+Saint Benedict, Abbot
Homily given at Our Lady of Clear Creek Abbey
July 11, 2020
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

At that time: Peter said to Jesus: Behold we have left all things, and have followed thee: what therefore shall we have?¹

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My Very Dear Sons,

The Holy Rule, written by Saint Benedict whose feast we are celebrating, has sometimes been called “the Bible of monks.” Some may think this a hyperbole, a mere pious exaggeration, but, like the Bible from which it is inspired, the Rule for monks is something of a universe of its own, an imposing spiritual landscape, where one encounters that fullness of truth, love, and being, which is the hallmark of the Catholic faith. Despite the austerity of its language in many passages, this thin but great book forms our souls in multiple ways, including its teaching of a sentiment that is all too forgotten in our day, that of spiritual joy. There is one passage in particular where this stands out:

During these days [of Lent], therefore, let us increase somewhat the usual burden of our service, as by private prayers and by abstinence in food and drink. Thus everyone of his own will may offer to God "with joy of the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:6) something above the measure required of him. From his body, that is, he may withhold some food, drink, sleep, talking and jesting and with the joy of spiritual desire he may look forward to holy Easter.²

Indeed, the greatest monks of history were full of this spiritual joy, as their biographers show us. They could not have led the life they led without it.

Dom Paul Delatte, the third abbot of Solesmes in France and the author of a widely celebrated commentary on the Rule of Saint Benedict, has some insightful things to tell us about spiritual joy:

Why joy?... Loving God is finding one's happiness in the happiness, the joy of God; it is, therefore, possessing complete and total joy, for God is immutably happy. The normal, persevering attitude of a baptized person is the high noon of joy; those who belong to God, who live by God, are given over to joy. Since we are with the Lord, and he with us, how do you expect our life not be a life of joy, of exultation? ... Peace for the present, hope for the future, and as the fruit, joyfulness, happiness, perfect joy.³

And the same Abbot Delatte adds this remark:

It is a duty for each one of us to be joyful. It is a remarkable religion in which joy is a precept, in which the command is to be happy, in which cheerfulness is a duty.⁴

Saint John Henry Newman spoke of spiritual joy as one of the great graces of the Early Church:

Joy in all its forms, he writes; not only a pure heart, not only a clean hand, but [also] a cheerful countenance...They had desired to sacrifice the kingdom of the world and all its pomps for the love of Christ...and when their wish was granted, they could but rejoice...Such was the joy of the first disciples

¹ Matthew 19:27.

² Chapter 49.

³ Dom Delatte, Commentary on Psalm 1, cited in the *The Spirit of Solesmes*, ed. Sister Mary David Totah, p. 144.

⁴ Dom Paul Delatte, Conference on John 15, 1902, cited in *The Spirit of Solesmes*, p. 146.

of Christ, to whom it was granted to suffer shame and undergo toil for his Name's sake; and such holy, gentle graces were the fruit of this joy, as every part of the gospels and epistles shows us.⁵

The same English Saint, as historian of the Church, took a great interest in the religious family of Saint Benedict and pondered much over the way of life of the early monks, showing how they differed from later forms of religious life. For Newman, it was the poetic mode of knowledge that befitted the black monks, rather than the theological mode of the Dominicans or the very practical mode of the Jesuits in modern times. This insight about the Benedictine monks rather reinforces what we have been saying about joy: there is a link between spiritual joy and a form of child-like simplicity. I quote here from Newman's famous essay on *The Mission of St. Benedict*:

And therefore have I called the monastic state the most poetical of religious disciplines. It was a return to that primitive age of the world, of which poets have so often sung, the simple life of Arcadia or the reign of Saturn, when fraud and violence were unknown. It was a bringing back of those real, not fabulous, scenes of innocence and miracle, when Adam delved, or Abel kept sheep, or Noe planted the vine, and Angels visited them. It was a fulfillment in the letter, of the glowing imagery of prophets, about the evangelical period. Nature for art, the wide earth and the majestic heavens for the crowded city, the subdued and docile beasts of the field for the wild passions and rivalries of social life, tranquility for ambition and care, divine meditation for the exploits of the intellect, the Creator for the creature, such was the normal condition of the monk. He had tried the world, and found its hollowness; or he had eluded its fellowship, before it had solicited him;—and so St. Antony fled to the desert, and St. Hilarion sought the sea shore, and St. Basil ascended the mountain ravine, and St. Benedict took refuge in his cave, . . . in order that the world might be shut out of view, and the soul might be at rest. And such a rest of intellect and of passion as this is full of the elements of the poetical.⁶

In our own time of so much sad news in the world around us, we stand in need of a strong dose of spiritual joy and a return to a healthy simplicity: not to the mindlessness of those who have no thought for their eternal destiny, but to the spiritual childhood recommended by Our Lord: “Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”⁷

“Joy,” wrote G. K. Chesterton “is the gigantic secret of the Christian.”⁸ So may it be with the sons of Saint Benedict and with their many friends. May Our Lady of the Annunciation, the very joyful Virgin, intercede for us. Our Blessed Father, Saint Benedict, pray for us. Amen. Alleluia.

⁵ John Henry Newman, *Selected Sermons*, (NY, Paulist Press, 1994), pp. 373-4.

⁶ Chapter 6.

⁷ Matthew 18:3.

⁸ From *Orthodoxy*, Chapter 9.