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Separation as a Primary Source of Unhappiness in Modern Society

The topic of joy and happiness in modern society poses a very interesting question. Having been raised in America I see depression and anxiety running amok. It seems that when American's go to a doctor for a headache they leave with anti-depressants. Children are on medication for depression, attention deficit disorder, and obesity. America is depressed. However, the great contradiction is that on the surface America seems to be a very happy place.

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As far as their outlook on life is concerned Europeans are not different than Americans. The world is getting smaller, travel is easier, and multi-cultural awareness is not the great mystery it was in years past. However, the problems we face today, as far as happiness is concerned, are not new. In fact, if we look back on the twentieth century we see the very same questions and so while the twenty-first century individual faces the challenges of a much smaller, electronic, and fast paced world, the question about happiness can be answered by propositions, which were suggested for a twentieth century world. A world that was much bigger but quickly shrinking. A world that seemed much slower but was rapidly gaining speed. As a theologian I believe the answer must come

from theology as it is grounded in God and this happiness we seek is the essence of the Christian message.

In his book *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton sites many reasons for the plight of the unhappy man: self-centeredness, self-reliance, individualism, and lack of adventure being some of them. While all of these are valid and interconnected I'd like to focus on just one of his themes. Chesterton writes: "The modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues. When a religious scheme is shattered (as Christianity was at the reformation), it is not merely the vices that are let loose. The vices are, indeed, let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone."¹ I chose this particular quote of Chesterton because the subject of my thesis is separation.

Sadly, groups of individuals in today's world seize upon virtues such as justice, charity, and truth, to further their cause but do so with pitiless ferocity. This ferocious pursuit separates society into camps. As Chesterton puts it: "Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful."² In other words we have truth without compassion, self-sacrifice without humility, and justice without mercy.

What indeed, then, is a virtue and how can the virtues affect man as a community? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that: "A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good."³ Josef Pieper comments further upon this in saying that a "[t]heological virtue is an ennobling of man's nature that entirely surpasses what he 'can be' of himself."⁴ And here is the crux of the issue: "what he 'can be' of *himself*." The virtues

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009, p. 27.

² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Citta del Vaticano, 1997,

1803.

⁴ J. Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997, p. 99.

are meant to push each individual to do what is good and in so doing the individuals become more than they can be of themselves. Virtues are not meant to be isolated from one another nor are they meant to isolate one person from another. However, in this strange paradox of separation I find that these people are in fact seeking unity. I say strange because in separating themselves from other groups they find unity in a small, like-minded portion of society where truth and justice are espoused while peace, compassion and mercy are murdered by their actions.

To further explain. The man of today seems to lack hope. Not hope on the natural plane, which includes the hopes for a better job, a vacation, or a home, but a hope that looks beyond. Hope is not an individual virtue but one that of necessity hopes for all. But of course this theological virtue is not fulfilled nor is it able to be fulfilled without faith. Faith breeds hope, hope begets charity, and charity blossoms into happiness and joy. Man forgets himself and his individualism, transcends his individual plight and sufferings to join with the present joy of his surroundings and his fellow man and thus experience the presence of God.

Joseph Ratzinger wrote that, "Man comes to deal with God in coming to deal with his fellowmen. Faith is fundamentally centered on 'You' and 'We'; only via this double clamp does it link man with God. The corollary of this is that by the inner structure of faith our relationship to God and our fellowship with man cannot be separated from each other; the relationship to God, to the 'You,' and to the 'We' are intertwined: they do not stand alongside each other. The same thing could be formulated from a different point of view by saying that God wishes to approach man only through man; he seeks out man in no other way but his fellow humanity."⁵ And so in our fellow humanity we have hope. The opposite of this hope is despair, which appears in various forms and with which man struggles to overcome. The modern man reaches for pills or therapy, which in and of themselves, when used correctly, are not bad and can often be helpful but if these methods are used alone and in an individualistic way, that is a searching for **my individual** happiness and **my individual**

⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1969, p. 93–94.

health without following the treatment with an active integration into a community, these methods can be sadly ineffective.

The solutions man has before him today speak to him alone. They are isolating. The home once used to be a place of family, of life, of death but in today's world it has become, a bedroom. Ratzinger says about the home: "In the daytime it effectively dematerializes. No more can it be that sheltering space which brings human beings together in birth and living, in sickness and dying. Indeed, sickness and death are becoming purely technological problems to be handled by the appropriate institution. These basic human things are thus pushed to the margins, not just so far as our deliberate thoughts about them are concerned, but socially, structurally. They cease to be physical and metaphysical problems which must be suffered and borne in a community of life, and become instead technical tasks technically handled by technical people."⁶

This separation of life from death, the pushing of it into the corners and to the margins has further separated people. Not only have generations been displaced, for example the very real problem of families placing and forgetting their relatives in retirement homes but the family unit has begun to disappear and children are now being raised by childcare providers instead of their parents and grandparents. Now not only are the virtues separated from each other but man's emotions have been isolated as well.

Grief, depression, sadness, and suffering have sent the individual away from the community. There are those who work in the margins feeding the hungry and helping the sick and poor but the average man does not want to see these things and he gives money to the Church or to some other charity as a way of helping thus leaving the question of suffering and death just outside his reach.

If today's society looks at death at all it is in a dramatic and violent way. A quick and spectacular death is the norm today. It has become something of a fascination to be displayed on the big screen, in movies

⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988, p. 70.

and television shows, and in mystery novels. Death has become something distant and unreal and has been “deprived of its character as a place where the metaphysical breaks through. Death is rendered banal, so as to quell the unsettling question which arises from it.”⁷

The desire for the time to put oneself in order before God and man has been replaced with the prayer for a quick and easy death, devoid of any time to reflect. A painless and swift death is the desire for today’s man so much so that several states in the US have adopted assisted suicide laws. Fear drives man to shy away from death, sickness, and anything unseemly, not because he hasn’t the stomach for it, but rather because it confronts man with the question of self and the future.

Ratzinger writes that, “Schleiermacher once spoke of birth and death as ‘hewed out perspectives’ through which man peers into the infinite. But the infinite calls his ordinary life-style into question. And therefore, understandably, humankind puts it to the ban. The repression of death is so much easier when death has been naturalized. Death must become object-like, so ordinary, so public that no remnant of the metaphysical question is left within it.”⁸

The question of death left out of the human mind keeps the question of hope on the natural plane. Without the greater need to draw man up, hope remains confined to hoping in the ordinary, and when the ordinary is achieved then man is left with an emptiness because he has then nothing left to hope for. This ordinary hope is a longing that can be fulfilled and “it can be comforted by a human ‘You’. But then there is the paradox that, as Claudel says, every ‘You’ found by man finally turns out to be an unfulfilled promise; that every ‘You’ is at bottom another disappointment and that there comes a point when no encounter can surmount the final loneliness: the very process of finding and of having found thus becomes a pointer back to the loneliness, a call to the absolute ‘You’ that really descends into the depths of one’s own ‘I.’”⁹

⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 70.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70–71.

⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 106.

The question of death becomes operative in everyday living when it places man in a position to ask himself about his relationship with the infinite, not just the future but the absolute future. Attitudes about dying determine attitudes about living.¹⁰

Karl Rahner approaches this subject in another way. He refers to a human existence, which has become an attempt to control and manipulate the future. “For what is the future?... [W]e should immediately emphasize that the future does not consist (or at least it does not consist exclusively) of that which is foreseen in the concrete and which will actually be in existence by tomorrow, since our concrete plans for it are already laid and the means for accomplishing it are already to hand, so that all we still need in order to bring it to reality is a little more time.”¹¹

However, this is exactly what that future has come to be for many people today. Life is spent in planning the future. The future is no longer a mystery. It has lost its surprise and adventure. And here we can find two sources of modern unhappiness. Either, the future that we build for ourselves appears just as we planned bringing with it some joy and happiness, but this joy and happiness is fleeting even though we do everything in our power to command it to stay. This joy cannot be retained and it slips from us leaving an emptiness and a longing for some other joy in the future, which we must now try to grasp. Or, the future comes to us in some unpredictable way that is not as we planned even though we put everything in motion and set it up to be what we wanted. We experience this when death and sickness shatter our plans. Again we are confronted with the metaphysical question we are not prepared to ask.

Death is a broken relationship with man, with community, and with God that leads to hopelessness and despair. It is, however, through death and despair that hope is born. When in despair, man recedes from life.

¹⁰ J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 72.

¹¹ K. Rahner, “A Fragmentary Aspect of a Theological Evaluation of the Concept of the Future”, *Theological Investigations X. Writings of 1965–1967 2*, trans. D. Bourke, New York: Herder and Herder, 1973, p. 235.

This is death in the form of isolation. The despairing fall further and further from life, to the edges.

Those in despair are not to be looked upon by society. To the contrary they are to be avoided or sent somewhere they can get the help they need. Our society has institutions and programs for people like this and thus we are relieved of, or perhaps deprived of, helping our fellowman. They become “instead technical tasks technically handled by technical people.”¹²

Happiness is found in living but “[h]uman life does not become real living simply by its mere presence. Genuine living is something we continually touch, yet in touching it experience how distant we still are from it. Life in the authentic sense of that word is present where sickness, loneliness and isolation are not, and where richness of fulfillment, love, communion, contact with God actually are.”¹³

So how to regain this true life? It seems to me that today’s world has separation where it should have none and has no separation where separation should be. In other words, man spends his days constructing his future joy and shunning the present circumstance of himself and his fellow. Life is no longer a balance between pain and joy but a relentless pursuit of joy and a staunch rejection of suffering. Living and the future have lost their mystery. Man now demands joy in his life and thereby evades it. “By asking for pleasure, he lost the chief pleasure: for the chief pleasure is surprise.”¹⁴

We have lost the need for surprise and the appreciation of needing the help of another, mostly because help is not needed in an individualistic society where I can find everything I need on the internet. The relentless pursuit of happiness has been separated from its companion suffering, which is quite unfortunate as “[t]he struggle with suffering is the place of human decision making *par excellence*.”¹⁵ This suffering brings man

¹² J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 70.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 51.

¹⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 95–96.

to see that he is, of himself, powerless over his own existence. That he is in fact subject to something beyond himself, his absolute future.

The choices that come to the individual as a result of this suffering and questioning are, on the one hand, to fight against his reality and try to wrestle his way to a better situation, or, to abandon himself to this power which lies beyond him, to surrender to the reality of his existence. The first response brings about anger, frustration, and more suffering by trying to make his future become that which he wants it to be. The second brings him into contact with dependence upon something outside of himself, with hope and love. This surrender to the dependence on our fellow in coming to meet that, which is beyond any one person, produces the small spark of hope that grows into the flame of love. This is “the daring of that love which leaves self behind, giving itself to the other.”¹⁶

This is the essence of Christian charity. It is where liberation from self, even in suffering, brings one to help his fellow man. Where value is given to and found in suffering, in that one’s suffering and liberation from the anger and struggle with the powerlessness of the human situation leads to freedom. Hope then is born and fostered in one man taking the hand of another. This is the hope that comes to the sufferer through his fellow-man and leads him to that which is beyond them both.

And here it is that freedom and happiness dwell. Where justice is balanced with mercy, self-sacrifice with humility, and truth with compassion that occurs in true dialogue between people. “The very fulfillment of love, of finding one another, can cause man to experience the gift of what he could neither call up nor create and make him recognize that in it he receives more than either of the two could contribute. The brightness and joy of finding one another can point to the proximity of absolute joy and the simple fact of being found that stands behind every human encounter.”¹⁷

¹⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 95.

¹⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 106–107.

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