

SALT *and* LIGHT

Happiness, Suffering, and the Meaning of Easter

by David Gibson

Is there anyone who doesn't want to be happy? Engaged couples hope their marriages will prove to be happy, satisfying unions. Parents want happiness for their children. And if only they could, countless people would lend happiness to friends, neighbors, and even people they never have met.

But happiness is a challenge. After all, do we even know what "happiness" means?

"The underlying assumption is that when people use the word 'happiness' they all mean the same thing, namely, the very loose concept of 'feeling good,'" Abbot Christopher Jamison, a British Benedictine, wrote in his 2008 book "Finding Happiness" (Liturgical Press).

Abbot Jamison said that "contemporary meanings of 'happiness' mainly involve feeling good." While there is "nothing wrong with feeling good," he said he found this customary definition of "happiness" too narrow.

"To find happiness, we need to broaden our definition so that feeling good is put into the wider context of doing good and knowing good," the abbot explained.

Easter links suffering directly to life's fullness. Christ's death is followed by resurrection. Thus, for Christians, happiness and suffering are not unrelated; "feeling good" does not alone define happiness.

That is not to say that Christians should enjoy suffering or go hunting for it. But Easter's message is that suffering need not pave the way to hopelessness and unhappiness.

In his 2007 encyclical on hope, Pope Benedict XVI wrote that "it is important to know that I can always continue to hope, even if in my own life, or the historical period in which I am living, there seems to be nothing left to hope for."

Msgr. Stephen Rossetti talked about suffering, happiness, and marriage in a February 25, 2011, speech in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, NY. He is a clinical associate professor of pastoral studies at The Catholic

University of America and is widely recognized for his expertise on matters of priestly well-being.

"To the secular mind suffering and happiness are mutually exclusive. The presence of one negates the other," Msgr. Rossetti told a group of priests. It is interesting that at this point he turned attention to marriage, since his speech focused in great part on the satisfaction so many priests in the US experience, despite the great pressures on them at this moment in time.

It is "largely assumed" in the United States today that suffering and happiness are strangers to each other, Msgr. Rossetti suggested. What is unfortunate in his view is that "this belief in the mutual incompatibility of hardship and satisfaction is devastating relationships and destroying lives."

Msgr. Rossetti said "when young married couples experience pain and struggle, they often assume something is wrong with their marriage. Many times the marriage is broken precipitously." He expressed concern that "when people encounter roadblocks in their lives and work, they assume the worst. It is assumed if we are suffering then something is wrong."

Having a theology of suffering "has helped us priests during our time of trial," Msgr. Rossetti said; it aids the recognition "that suffering and happiness are not incompatible." In fact, he added, "we cannot reach true human happiness and fulfillment without it. There is no resurrection without the cross."

Msgr. Rossetti believes that "intuitively, wise people come to understand this. Older married couples realize that marriage at times involves hard work. They come to realize that the deeper levels of intimacy can only be achieved through such struggles."

So it is "with any life," he said. "The deeper levels of sanctity and joy can only be found by traversing the darkness."

New Zealand's Catholic bishops published a pastoral letter on suffering in 2010. "We know suffering

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cannot be totally eradicated. It is part of life,” the bishops commented. It was their conviction that, “unable to avoid suffering, none of us should have to meet it alone.”

The bishops said that Mary, whose son died on a cross, “provides the perspective and the motivation for us to use difficulties, disappointments, loss and whatever negatively affects our lives to deepen our understanding of what life is about and to draw us closer to God and to one another.”

In his encyclical on hope, Pope Benedict said that while efforts can be undertaken “to limit suffering,” it is not possible to “eliminate it.” What, then, are people to do and think? The pope said:

“It is when we attempt to avoid suffering by withdrawing from anything that might involve hurt, when we try to spare ourselves the effort and pain of pursuing truth, love and goodness that we drift into a life of emptiness in which there may be almost no pain, but the dark sensation of meaninglessness and abandonment is all the greater.

“It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love” (*Spe Salvi*, no. 37).

David Gibson is a freelance writer who served on Catholic News Service’s editorial staff for thirty-seven years.

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