

Catholic

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The Joy of Being CATHOLIC

As Pope Francis says, "The Church is not a refuge for sad people. The Church is a house of joy." Let's look at some reasons for our Catholic joy.

KATHY COFFEY



When Catholics are baptized, the Christian community welcomes them “with great joy.” Not with an agenda, criticism, challenge, or a 14-page questionnaire. Instead, new members are welcomed with the “great joy” of the shepherd who hoists the lost sheep onto his shoulders (Lk 15:5), focused more on love than sin.

A goal of every religion is joy, often defined as being fully alive, and being united with God and all creation for eternity. Over and over, Jesus speaks of his mission to bring joy and our call to receive it, to be joy-filled.

But Catholicism isn't a walk in the park. Our high hopes for the kingdom require daily, gritty work on earth to achieve God's justice. Despite the Church's human failings, some of the finest people who ever lived have drawn strength and found joy in its treasures. Let's consider a few of the reasons for our Catholic joy.

Made in God's Image

Catholics believe that, in Jesus, the divine and human met in a perfect marriage. As St. Athanasius said, “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.” It sounds too good to be true. We—limited and flawed humans—are made in the very image of the divine; we are God's children, and God dwells and acts in us.

The life of the Christian is grafted directly onto Jesus' life. He said, “I no longer call you slaves.... I have called you friends” (Jn 15:15). We aren't slaves motivated by fear but rather children secure in a lavish inheritance—a meaningful life now and eternal life after death.

This heritage of joy is for everyone. Saints who had nothing in their bank accounts, no frequent-flier miles, and no reservations at a five-star resort record deep happiness. Who wouldn't join poet Anne Sexton in her yearning, “I plead with it to be true!”? The U.S. bishops' Committee on Divine Worship writes, “The people of God . . . form a society whose task it is to praise.” What a job description!

Servants of the Kingdom

Seeing life through the lens of resurrection emphasizes its joys. The astounding claims to eternal life made at Easter are about us as well as about Jesus. To be sure, most lives have their share of dark spaces. But even the less lofty parts of our lives—the tragedies, disappointments, pains, and frustrations—can be better understood in the light of Christ's own suffering, death, and resurrection.

“I have seen the Lord,” Mary Magdalene told the other disciples (Jn 20:18). This was, after all, the Lord they had seen crucified, then entombed, lifeless. Later, the other disciples would echo her, telling Thomas who had been absent, “We have seen the Lord” (Jn 20:25). These words become the hallmark

of every Christian, as we see Jesus in the circumstances of life, relationships, and the beauty of our world. Recognizing even the faintest traces of his face, we rejoice.

The difficulty for us is believing the magnificent claims and living up to them. We're content with small change when the essence of our faith offers us thousand-dollar bills. St. John of the Cross seemed in touch with this when he asked, “Created for such grandeur, what are you doing, O soul?”

Throughout the Bible, the message recurs: you are not a slave, but a friend, an adopted child with an eternal inheritance—not condemned to a life of futility and an empty death. Jesus has sanctified everything human, making us “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pt 2:9). Even as children, we come



to know we're not on earth for only our own pleasure. Always, we're called to something greater.

Our gifts are given for the service of Christ's kingdom on earth. We learn that each person will make a unique contribution, depending on talents, opportunity, education, and interests. No matter how little we think we have, we're taught early on to share that with others.

The implications are indeed unsettling. God chooses each of us for a unique purpose and equips us to get it done. With the shiny new identity given us at Baptism, we're commissioned for a specific work in the kingdom: “What the soul is in the body, let Christians be in the world” (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” 38).

Dignity and Purpose

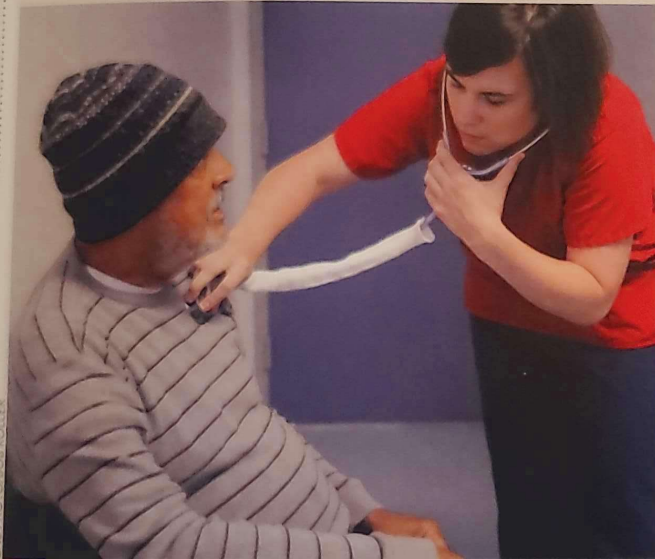
Every person is created in God's image and so bears an intrinsic dignity that must be respected by individuals and society. Our Catholic commitment to social justice is rooted in our belief in human dignity. The ways that some people are tortured, dehumanized, oppressed, belittled, and deprived of life's essentials are denials of their dignity.

The true search for justice tries to eliminate the destructive elements of both wealth and poverty so that all of humanity

may develop to its fullest potential. Direct service to the needy is important as are efforts to change any systems that oppress them. Systemic change encourages the needy to find strategies to help them emerge from poverty. Both are necessary.

Jesus says, "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30), and we can also say that of ourselves. The bottom-line identity of the human being is "beloved child of God." If we really believed that, wouldn't it make a huge difference? We would no longer plod through our routines, heightened only by the drama of crisis, lugging the baggage of guilt or anxiety. Instead, we would walk freely and joyfully through God's abundance, delighting in God's gifts.

What Jesus found within, a deep intimacy with his Father, is open to us all. We touch this power when we teach, heal, or pass on the good news. This is why when confronting the hunger of the 5,000 (Lk 9:12-17), Jesus told the disciples, "Give them some food yourselves." It's why he involved the crowd gathered at Lazarus' tomb: you roll away the stone; you unbind him (see Jn 11:39, 44). We can't expect God to do everything; that's why God gave us power and intelligence.



Universal Call to Holiness

Because Jesus' heart is God's, and he became human, he has sanctified everything human. God dwells and acts in human flesh. As long as we are receptive to Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit, everything we do can be united to this deepest meaning and potential of human life.

Unlike the Marines, God isn't looking for only "a few good men." God draws and calls everyone in what the Church refers to as the "universal call to holiness." While there's a difference between the common priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial priesthood of the ordained, the one Spirit works through both, creating a priestly people. "Worshiping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God" ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" 34). The specific role of laypeople is to be light and salt in places where the Gospel can be spread only by them.

A CATHOLIC CHORUS



Any choral group has its altos and sopranos, its star soloists, and maybe a few voices that are slightly off-key. When I asked a variety of Catholics what about the Church brings them joy, their unique voices blend into a joyful chorus:

"Sometimes I can't sleep or I'm feeling blue. Then I remind myself that somewhere in the world, the Mass is happening. Bread and wine are being consecrated into Christ's body and blood. Knowing that buoys me."

"I think of the Catholic Church as a massive family. Some well-to-do, others not so much. We're all welcome and we know the same recipes—the sacraments and Scriptures."

"My family is far-flung in different states, but when I hear the Liturgy of the Word on Sunday, we're all connected—hearing and relating to the same Bible stories!"

"The faith offers us a healthy way to approach death. The ritual comforts us by saying, 'It's not the end; we'll see this person again.'"

"Becoming a member of the Church was like joining a loving family. I wanted to immerse myself as completely as I could."

"When liturgy's done well, it's remarkable. I can find good people other places, but not this liturgy. Without it, I'd be hungry."

"The best thing is the companions—Scripture, the prophets, Jesus, the desert dwellers, Benedict and monastic traditions, the saints, each other!"

Our belief in resurrection affects every moment on this side of eternity. Easter is woven like a hopeful gold thread through all our experiences. As Dom Helder Camara of Brazil wrote: "We Christians . . . are not born to die; we are born to live. We must hold on to hope . . . since we have the deep certainty of being born for Easter." And there we find our reason for joy.



CNS PHOTO/JIM WEST

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DIG DEEPER

What are some of the joys you find in Catholicism?

Are you as joyful a Catholic as you could be? What is holding you back?

What can you do to share the joy of being Catholic with others?

'SAINTS AMONG THE SAINTS'

Catholicism encircles the globe and reaches throughout history. We're a people on the move, never stagnant, but pressing into eternity. Humbly—and joyfully—we take our place in a long procession:

Francis of Assisi: "Praised be my Lord God in all your creatures."

Julian of Norwich: "Sin doesn't have the last word. Grace does."

Catherine of Siena: "What a marvelous thing, that even while we are in the dark, we should know the light. That in finite things we should know the infinite! That even while we exist in death, we should know life!"

Meister Eckhart: "What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to birth the Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?"

Thomas More: "I die the king's good servant, but God's first. And I pray that we may all meet merrily in paradise."

John XXIII: "I convened the Second Vatican Council so the human sojourn on earth might be less sad."

Teresa of Kolkata: "To show great love for God and our neighbor, we need not do great things. It is how much love we put in the doing that makes our offering something beautiful for God."

Christian de Chergé, Trappist martyr: "It is of little concern where in the chain we are. The important thing is to be in the chain, united with Christ."

Pope Francis: "To believe in and to follow [Christ] is . . . something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties."

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