



## LIFE MARKED BY JOY

“Let us rejoice in our beautiful vocation” and “Always cheerful, and God will help!” - these are words that Blessed Mother Foundress often repeated to her first Sisters, and which she wishes to say again to each one of us today.

What is the true joy we want to reflect on this month? Pope Francis, in a homily given on the 28<sup>th</sup> May 2018, calls it the breath of the Christian. “A Christian who is not joyful in his heart is not a good Christian. Joy is a breath; it is the Christian's way of expressing himself. It is not something that can be bought or acquired through one's own efforts. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit... This joy is not living from smile to smile. It is not being funny. Christian joy is peace. This joy is at the root, it is in the heart and only God can give it.”

The foundation on which Christian joy is based is memory and hope. Memory because we cannot forget what God has done for us, regenerating us to new life, and hope for our encounter with Him. Memory and hope allow us to live in true joy - not empty and carefree joy, but joy that is based on peace. Pope Francis reminds us that the modern world is content with a culture that suggests many things to amuse itself, many ways to live a “carefree life” (“la dolce vita”). But these do not give full happiness, because true joy is not bought on the market. Joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit and does not cease even in moments of trial and suffering.

### Joy in the life of Blessed Maria Theresa

Was our Blessed Mother a joyful person? Biographies present her as rather serious, but underneath this outward seriousness, we can easily perceive a heart full of kindness and goodness, full of the true joy which sprang from union with God and love of creatures. As a child and a young girl, she was able to enjoy family life, meeting people, acquiring knowledge, the love of art, travelling and the beauty of nature.

As a lady in waiting of the Dukes of Tuscany in Salzburg, she met the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary for the first time in 1886. A year later another meeting took place, after which she noted in her diary: “... *these two Franciscan Sisters. What a joy! Taken to the Archduchess. With me until their departure*”. Why great joy? Joy because God was opening before her the mission world and with it the path of her personal vocation. She also experienced great joy when she met Cardinal Lavigerie and later when she decided to dedicate herself entirely to work for Africa. Her words testify to this: “Holy Communion for a new way of life - I am very happy and peaceful”.

When she bought the property at Maria Sorg in 1897, she said to the first Sisters: “*This will be the new home of the Sodality of St. Peter Claver. Always cheerful, and God will help! He will take care of us and Our Lady will do so as well*”. In the last year of her life, February 1922, she had an audience with Pope Pius XI, who assured her that her work came from the will of God and that it brought blessings to the Church and the missions. The Pope's words and the apostolic blessing on the Sodality filled her with great gratitude and immeasurable joy.

Blessed Maria Theresa's inner joy derived from her constant union with God, whether praying, working or suffering, and from her gratitude for the grace of her vocation. Mother Waleria Bielak's testimony describing the last moments of her earthly life is so eloquent: “Our Foundress' head was resting

on a pillow, face upwards. Suddenly her countenance lit up. A heavenly smile appeared on her lips. Joy and astonishing happiness which cannot be described, appeared on her face. This blessed smile was repeated several times and all the sisters present noticed it feeling deeply moved. During her life, Maria Teresa had spoken a great deal, but none of her speeches were as moving as that silent smile at the moment of her death”.

Our Blessed Mother Foundress was happy on earth because she dedicated her entire life to God, and for the love of Him, to serving the poorest. In the love of God and neighbour she found the source of true happiness and joy.

### **The source of true joy**

Pope Francis, at the beginning of the Year of Consecrated Life, wrote an Apostolic Letter entitled: “Witnesses of Joy”. In it he wrote to us: “Where there are religious, there is joy. We are called to know and to show that God is able to fill our hearts to the brim with happiness; that we need not seek our happiness elsewhere; that the authentic fraternity found in our communities increases our joy; and that our total self-giving in service to the Church and the poor, brings us life-long personal fulfilment”.

How similar are the words we find in the pamphlet “The Vocation of the Missionary Auxiliary for Africa”, where our Blessed Mother Foundress explains what the vocation of a Claverian sister is about: *“Every heartbeat, every minute of her life belongs to God, to the Congregation and to the mission”*.

She herself had experienced this in her own life and has therefore shown us as a sure path on how to realise our Claverian vocation and find authentic joy in life. This path of our vocation is:

- giving our lives to God;
- building a community;
- dedication to the service of the missions.

### **The joy of a life dedicated to God**

As consecrated persons we are called to experience and show the world that God can fill our hearts and make us happy. Our vocation to consecrated life is the exclusive initiative of God, who expects us to respond by giving ourselves totally and exclusively to Him. The experience of this gracious love of God is so deep and so powerful that we feel the need to respond by unconditionally dedicating our lives to Him and giving Him all that we have - our present and our future (cf. VC 17).

Blessed Mother Foundress teaches us to find joy in giving our lives to God: *“Jesus is to be all our love, all our passion, our longing, our desire and our goal! Then this New Year will be very happy for us too!”* (MTL, 1.01.1914). *“In religious life God requires an undivided heart, all our love”*. (MTL, 1.02.1905). She herself, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, understood that she also was called to have at heart only the honour of Jesus Christ and to seek only His interests, and therefore she consecrated herself completely to Him (cf. Const. art.1).

“By consecration we give ourselves totally to God who is supremely loved and we strive with a fervent love to live the style of life that the Son of God lived when he came into the world. We are the instruments He uses to prolong His life and mission in the world”. (Const. art. 14). By living the vows “our life becomes a sign of that fullness of joy, of love, of liberation and of fraternity that the Lord promises to those who seek His Face”. (Const. art. 15). By the vow of chastity, we give ourselves to God with an undivided heart; by the vow of poverty, we proclaim that God is our only wealth; by the vow of obedience, we commit ourselves to do His will. We live our particular mission in the image of Christ, confident that “the more one lives for Christ, the better one may serve Him in others”. (Const. art. 8).

Therefore, following the instructions of our Foundress, every day we renew our total dedication to God in order to be His joyful witnesses in the world.

### **The joy of fraternal community**

The authentic fraternal life lived in our communities also strengthens our joy, because through our Sisters we remain in Christ “with one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). By living in community, we commit ourselves to the “new commandment” of Christ, loving one another as He has loved us. Love led Christ to give himself and to make the supreme sacrifice of the Cross. Among His disciples too, true unity is not possible without this unconditional love for one another, which requires a readiness to serve sacrificially, an ability to accept a Sister as she is, an ability to forgive even “seventy-seven times”. (cf. VC 42). If by the power of this love, poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we become “one heart and one soul”, we will feel an inner need to give everything to the community: our material goods and spiritual experiences, talents and ideas, and apostolic ideals.

Every day we must make an effort to build fraternity through reciprocal love nourished by the Word of God and the Eucharist, purified in the sacrament of reconciliation and sustained by prayer. In this way we learn to live as Sisters, bearing with each other's weaknesses, helping each other in problems and difficulties. Called by the Lord to a particular religious family, we do not choose each other, but we welcome each other. At the same time, we commit ourselves to walk together on the path of asceticism, so that from a group of people we create a community of happy women who follow Christ. We are aware that our strength springs from the unity of our hearts, and that only by being united among ourselves can we do great things for God. According to the teaching of our Foundress: we may remain without a slice of bread, but as long as we help one another and think of each other, all will be well (cf. Const. art. 44). *My dear Sisters: Caritas Christi urget nos! The love of Christ compels us! It is this love that has gathered us here. It would be a mistake, however, if we had come here out of love for God and for the poor Africans, and would not extend this love first of all to those closest to us. God comes first, then the superiors, then our fellow sisters, and then the poor Africans. This is ordered love (MTL, 27.08.1911).*

### **The joy of serving the missions**

“Animated by love for God, whom we love above all things, and love for our brothers and sisters, especially the most needy in mission territories, we collaborate in their evangelization - the most divine of divine works - and in their human promotion” (Const. art. 4). This is our mission in the Church, which we undertake by continuing the work of our Blessed Mother Foundress. Fulfilling this mission and placing ourselves entirely at the service of the missionary Church and the poorest gives our lives fullness and joy. “We are characterised by the desire to help the Kingdom of God take root and grow everywhere, especially in Africa. Our primary means are prayer, the giving of ourselves, and various activities to promote and support the missions. Our priority is to transmit to others the fire of Christ that burns in our hearts, to spread ever further the love for the Mission, so it may take root in all hearts”. (Const. art. 4).

Our apostolate of missionary animation is carried out by involving everyone in missionary cooperation in order to provide missionaries with the spiritual and material assistance necessary to evangelise the nations. “Our vocation, often requires us renounce the satisfaction of seeing the fruits of our labour and daily toils. This joyful sacrifice is an integral part of our missionary identity”. (Const., art. 11).

Our Blessed Mother Foundress taught us this joyful sacrifice convinced that “God loves a cheerful giver”: *Does this mean the life of a Sister should be sad and without joy? Oh no! The joy of the just is from God and in God. “Always cheerful, and God will help”. This is one of the mottoes of the Sodality, and that is why people indulging in despondency are not suitable for it – “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). However, a Sister is not completely devoid of joy. The feeling that one is working for God*

*and for the salvation of souls is in itself the best consolation* (MTL, Vocation of the Missionary Auxiliary). *An active life in the Sodality brings a special inner peace, because we do not work for ourselves, but for God and for His most important cause - the salvation of immortal souls. This thought makes every work and every sacrifice easy and even pleasant. "Taste and see how good the Lord is" (Ps 34:9),* (MTL, Vocation of the Missionary Auxiliary).

While serving the missions, we wish to live in a spirit of faith from which we draw the supernatural consolation that helps us to rejoice in the Lord, even when our efforts go unnoticed and our work unappreciated. Faith also enables us to perceive what escapes the human eye: that every work, even the smallest, done in union with Christ in the unceasing gift of self, becomes fruitful in the logic of salvation (cf. Const., art. 11).

### **A life that emanates joy**

To conclude our reflection, let us focus on the words of Pope Francis, who in his Apostolic Letter "Witnesses to Joy" urges "none of us should be dour, discontented and dissatisfied, for 'a gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom'. Like everyone else, we have our troubles, our dark nights of the soul, our disappointments and infirmities, our experience of slowing down as we grow older. But in all these things we should be able to discover 'perfect joy'. For it is here that we learn to recognize the face of Christ, who became like us in all things, and to rejoice in the knowledge that we are being conformed to Him who, out of love of us, did not refuse the sufferings of the cross. In a society which exalts the cult of efficiency, fitness and success, one which ignores the poor and dismisses 'losers', we can witness by our lives to the truth of the words of Scripture: 'When I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12:10)".

May joy always radiate from our faithful devotion to God, the beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ. The Church does not grow by proselytizing, but by attraction. The consecrated life will not flourish as a result of brilliant vocation programs, but because the young people we meet find us attractive, because they see us as women who are happy! Similarly, our apostolic effectiveness does not depend on the efficiency of our methods. It depends on the eloquence of our lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full. (cf. Witnesses of Joy).

### **Personal reflection**

- Do the words of Pope Francis: where there are religious, there is joy, express the truth about my life? Is joy the breath of my life?
- Do I allow God to fill my heart and make me happy?
- Does authentic fraternity lived in community strengthen my joy?
- Is apostolic engagement a source of joy for me?
- Does joy radiate from my commitment to God, the beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ?

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*Sr. Agata Wójcik*