

Joy

A Reflection on the Note on Joy by Fr Nicholas Gandy, OGS

Before I begin my reflections on the Seventh Note, I thought it would be good for us to be 'surprised by joy'.

In his so-called 'Epistle of Joy', the letter to the Philippians, St Paul speaks of a gift he received as, a 'fragrant' offering. (Phil 4.18)

In 2 Corinthians, he speaks of 'the fragrance that comes from knowing God'. He says of his fellow believers, 'we are the aroma of Christ'. 'Through us,' he says, 'God spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him.' (see 2 Cor 2.14-15)

I thought that you may be interested to know what 'Joy' smells like.

So I've got some here in a bottle. (30ml bottle of 'Joy' Eau de Parfum by Jean Patou)

Before I begin my address, I'd like to invite you to spray two squirts of Joy on the back of one hand and rub it in with your other hand then pass the bottle on.

What you are applying is considered to be one of the greatest fragrances ever created. It is certainly one of the costliest.

This 30 ml bottle contains the essence of 10, 000 jasmine flowers, 28 dozen roses and many other rare ingredients.

It was created in 1929 by Henri Almeras for the Parisian couturier Jean Patou as a defiant response to the disaster of the Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression: a 'statement' to affirm that joy is very precious indeed and that it can emerge – and spread – even in the darkest of times and the direst of circumstances.

The Seventh Note of the Oratory is 'Joy'

'Members of the Oratory will regularly make thanksgiving to God for his love until thanksgiving be spontaneous and perpetual. They will be regular in recreation; they will avoid anxiety and fuss; they will disown discouragement and depression, and check all complaint and bitterness as destructive of the brethren's joy as well of their own. They will accept gladly their share of weariness and sorrow in the joyful spirit of the saints, and the faithful following of him who for the joy that was set before him endured the Cross. They will welcome any labour or sacrifice which will minister to the

joy of others, looking toward that most blessed voice, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

Joy - what a wonderful Note to end on!

Not just to end a retreat - but to anticipate the climax of everything.

The New Testament teaches that joy is a fruit of the Spirit. It develops in disciples as they give themselves to Jesus and he gives himself to them.

Joy is one of the hallmarks of a life lived close to God – the deep seated sense of happiness that knows that God remembers us, that God loves us, that God accompanies us and that God is waiting for us at the end of our journey, no matter how difficult or painful or challenging it may be in the moment. Joy isn't contingent on temporal circumstances but on God who is eternal.

Bishop John Inge, writing in the Church Times a few months ago (13th April, 2017) said, *'The Christians who have impressed me most are those who have clearly been filled with a deep down joy even in adversity. Take Archbishop Desmond Tutu - he always seems to be full of joy and laughter, a sign he has been able to keep a godly perspective on things rather than being weighed down?'*

The Shorter Westminster Catechism begins by teaching that the purpose for which we were given life in the first place is 'to glorify God' by living it in a godly way - in order that we might 'enjoy God for ever'.

The fullness of Joy is what we might hope for when our Christian pilgrimage reaches its climax - on that 'other shore and in a greater light'. But the journey begins here on earth and in the Seventh and final Note, our Oratory forebears give us down-to-earth guidance on how we might enable joy to become more of a lived experience now.

When invited to choose a Note to reflect on, without hesitation, I immediately opted for the Note on 'Joy' - not because I imagine myself to be an advanced exemplar, but because I've found its wisdom and inspiration to be so helpful to me.

Evelyn Waugh, when asked how he reconciled being such a miserable individual with being a Christian said, 'think what I would be like if I were not a Christian!'

Well, I don't think that I am a particularly miserable individual, but I dare to hope that whatever joy is to be found in me, twenty one years after profession, has been nurtured, in some part, by the wisdom of Note Seven.

The first Oratorian I ever met was Father Frederick Perkins, a man who seemed to me to have a deep un-showy Christian contentment about him. As an ordinand in training, I had been sent by Saint Stephen's House to the parish of St Mary's Potters Bar for my four-week pastoral placement. The vicar's wife said "You must meet Father Perkins OGS." - as though Perkins-Ogs were a double barrelled surname. So I did. Frederick was the retired assistant priest and he invited me to lunch one day – and very generous with his hospitality he was too. I learned about his ministry in New Zealand and something about the Oratory which had clearly been a blessing and a joy to him. He was not remotely pushy, but he planted a seed. How important it is for us to go on planting seeds!

My next encounter with the Oratory came five years later, when during my first incumbency, I began to feel an increasing attraction for the religious life, especially the Benedictine way. In fact, I spent some time in retreat in both Anglican and Roman Catholic communities. But my 'spiritual profile' didn't seem to fall into any clear category. Being a parish priest had long felt very much what I was called to, yet I felt increasingly drawn to a more contemplative way and the fellowship of a community.

As it happened, my brother was lodging at that time with Father Tom Summers who was vicar of a parish in Finsbury Park, London. Learning that Tom was a member of the Oratory, I got myself invited to see him and began to attend the monthly lunchtime chapter meetings held at his vicarage. I found Tom delightfully eccentric, clever and kind - and a priest through and through. After mass, over our packed lunches there was much laughter and enjoyment in each other's company but the fellowship seemed to be undergirded by something deeper and life-giving - and I would say with hindsight, the joy that comes when fellow pilgrims spend time with each other.

This could all sound a bit romantic and idealistic. But it seemed to me to be authentic and attractive. Under Tom's gentle and kindly guidance, given during in our weekly telephone conversations, I became a Probationer and ended up attending the General Chapter at Maryvale.

It was at Maryvale that I met some of the elder statesman of the Oratory, which included a philosophy professor, a number of bishops and others who were particularly gifted and interesting in terms of who they were and what they had done. This could have been very intimidating, but the overriding 'feel' was one of warmth, welcome and hospitality.

I was impressed by the way in which brothers who were clearly very different enjoyed warm fellowship with each other and there seemed to be

an attempt for people to mix, not just with those who were like themselves, but with everyone.

Notwithstanding the warmth and conviviality, there was a shared seriousness of purpose at the heart of the fellowship which was God-centred. On reflection, I think I was noticing that there was joy in the community. This felt right, and I went on to make my first profession.

If I were looking for a sign that this was a good thing to do, the Superior who received my profession, several weeks later became my Bishop. The incoming Superior paid me a pastoral visit on the very day of our departure - visiting me at my vicarage several hours later as I was sat in my study in front of the computer adding the letters 'OGS' to my letterhead! That incoming Superior, our beloved and late departed brother, Bishop John Salt, witnessed my vanity with his wonderful mirth-filled laugh.

In many ways, perspective is probably the key to that happy state we call joy. Paul's letter to the Philippians was written from a prison cell, but not for nothing is it known as the, 'Epistle of joy'. "Rejoice in the Lord always" he says, 'and again I say rejoice.' (Phil 4.4)

In the words of the Seventh Note: *'Members of the Oratory will regularly make thanksgiving to God for his love until thanksgiving be spontaneous and perpetual.'*

Here we are encouraged to be regular in thanksgiving. Regular implies being intentional. It suggests commitment to a practice; a practice of paying attention to what in our experience is a gift of God's love: a gift of grace. Interestingly, the Greek word for joy is closely related to the Greek word for grace. To recognise grace brings joy.

That wise old adage beloved of pious grandmothers, 'Count your blessings' makes for contentment that the glass is at least half full.

It is significant that the Jesuits' practice of prayerfully reviewing the day, known as the Examen, is a practice that begins by giving thanks for all those moments and encounters we are grateful to God for. If practised on a daily basis it becomes a sure way to *'regularly make thanksgiving to God for his goodness until thanksgiving become spontaneous and perpetual.'* For the practice re-sets our compass in a way that makes gratitude and contentment a more likely vantage point from which to see everything else that happens to us.

I only wish I were more consistent in practising the Examen myself because I know that during those seasons when I am, setbacks feel less frustrating, I've a greater sense of well-being and I am more open to others.

It strikes me that the agenda of our College Chapter meetings would be enriched if it included a specific opportunity for members to share one incident in their lives since the previous meeting, for which they were particularly thankful to God. For example....

Last year, on Trinity Sunday, I baptised two baby twin boys: Harry and Teddy. I'm always pleased if the name of a baptizand is biblical, because it enables me to make connections between the child and the bigger story. 'Harry' and 'Teddy' offered little scope for that, but Teddy had a second name: Isaac. Just before the baptism, I told the story of Sarah, how she laughed on hearing that she would give birth and how the very name 'Isaac' means 'laughter'. At that moment, Teddy Isaac looked intently at me and broke out into the most wonderful laugh for about 30 seconds. It was an extraordinary moment - and the whole congregation was full of the joy of it.

No doubt, several people took furtive photographs of the laughing Isaac. It was a wonderful moment. But there's something about that kind of joy which can't be caught on camera. It exists in the moment.

As William Blake once observed:

He who binds to himself a joy,

does the winged life destroy

but he who kisses the joy as it flies

lives in eternities sun rise. (Eternity by William Blake 1757 -1827)

To cultivate an habitually thankful disposition doesn't mean, of course, that we can't be honest in prayer about life's difficulties and sorrows, but it does remind us that, whatever we are going through, God does actually love us very much.

Some of the Psalms illustrate this perfectly. Take Psalm 13 for example, where David begins by pouring out his complaints to God : *How long O Lord will you forget me - for ever?*

But he ends up rejoicing and singing to the Lord '*because he has dealt so bountifully with me*'.

'They will be regular in recreation'

'Recreation' for members of religious communities used to have a rather wholesomely twee aspect to it. One day, looking through a book on the Poor Clare's of Assisi, I recall seeing an old black and white photograph entitled 'The sisters at recreation'. A circle of happy nuns were standing in the garden and throwing and catching a ball with each other. I could imagine them saying (in Italian) 'O sisters aren't we having such fun?'

I don't know whether any of our Oratory forebears were keen golf players. Some, perhaps, saw recreation as an opportunity to write sonnets in Latin? Some, I know, enjoyed their summers motoring through the first growth claret regions of the Bordeaux.

In today's climate, the requirement of our Rule to be '*regular in recreation*' is full of wisdom and balance. Though 'recreation', I think, has a richer dimension to it than mere leisure. Certainly we need time for rest, but we also need variety in the kinds of things we give our energies and attention to. We need intellectual and physical exercise, we need spiritual and aesthetic nourishment too. And we need the simple enjoyment that comes through being in the company of others.

As most Oratorians live alone, it's our own responsibility to be intentional in planning our recreation, lest the pressure of events crowds it out. In a busy parish, the 'day off' (or it's more politically correct designation, 'the rest day') can too easily be a day of chores. So I'm grateful for the nudge this Note gives to plan something that is recreational. Sometimes I achieve it.

One of the joys of chapter meetings is the recreation of just being with other members of the oratory family.

'They will avoid anxiety and fuss; they will disown discouragement and depression'

Here again, I'm reminded of words from Philippians:

'Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.' Philippians 4:6-7

I could imagine some psychotherapists today taking issue with the injunction to 'avoid anxiety and fuss' and 'disown discouragement and depression'. 'Avoid' implies that we have the capacity to make a choice and for some people the nature and degree of anxiety and depression is such as to render free choice very difficult - if not impossible. Whether these

states are different in kind or degree to those referred to in the Note, I don't know. But *I have learned* over the years that when it comes to 'anxiety' and 'depression' I have far more choice than I used to think I had.

That revelation came to me quite vividly early on during my first incumbency. I was feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenge facing me and the multiplicity of tasks I needed to get through just to keep my head above water. As I sat in my usual chair during the hour of prayer one morning I was very nearly tempted to press the 'can't cope button'. I contemplated the scenario of asking my GP to sign me off for three months – a little escape fantasy that gave momentary relief. Doubtless, a note would be put in my file to the effect that I was 'weak and failing' but I was almost past caring.

It was then that I heard the voice, not audibly, but clearly and insistently - within myself: **'You have a choice'**. It came out of the blue. 'You have a choice. It doesn't have to be like this'. I could be free from this burden - and I was!

I'm reminded of that therapeutic mantra: 'I have feelings, but I am not my feelings. I have thoughts but I am not my thoughts.'

At any rate, I was free of the burden of the moment.

The words of that old hymn are no less true for their sentiment: *'Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!'* (What a friend I have in Jesus. Joseph M. Scriven, 1820-1886)

So I see this clause of the Seventh Note as an encouragement to turn our gaze away from self to God. I was sitting in my chair for the hour of prayer worrying, but not praying.

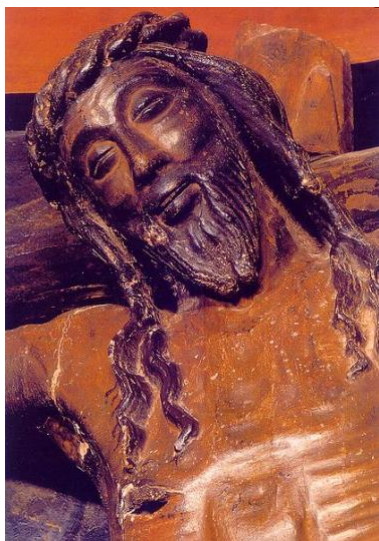
What wisdom Cranmer showed when he included Matthew 11.28 in the 'comfortable words' of the Communion service. *'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'*

(Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' Matthew 11:29-30)

We learn from Philippians (2.2-3) that for Paul, joy was complete when his community were of the same mind and where they did nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regarded others as better than themselves.

But spiritual communities have spiritual vulnerabilities and a good Rule will identify the threats and seek to pre-empt them. St Benedict's Rule recognised murmuring to be one of those failings most destructive of community. In a similar vein, our Oratory forbears wisely advise us *'to check all complaint and bitterness as destructive of the brethren's joy as well as of our own'*. Complaint, of course, can be legitimate if given in charity to the appropriate person, but voicing discontent informally to others can sow the seeds of discord and poison community. Likewise, bitterness: when we allow a perceived offence to get under our skin and the offender to take up residence in our heads, is one of the most spiritually debilitating states to be in. Our fathers were wise to raise our consciousness to the dangers. 'Nepsis' – the monastic practice of interior vigilance, can help us spot the demons as they come over the horizon and hopefully wave goodbye to them.

Saint Therese of Lisieux was a master (or should I say mistress) of this: *'Ever since I placed myself into the arms of Jesus.'* she wrote, *'I have been like a watchman on the lookout for the enemy in the highest tower of a castle. Nothing escapes me.'*



Xavier Castle in northern Spain has a chapel with a very interesting crucifix. The photograph you were given shows details of the corpus. The castle was, of course, the birthplace of the great Jesuit missionary, St. Francis Xavier. For me, this 13th century image of the crucified Christ- with just a hint of a smile on his face - touches on the paradox that joy and suffering are not mutually exclusive.

Sooner or later we learn that the call to Christian discipleship is not a call to a life of comfort and ease and not many in Christian ministry today could write a diary that much resembled that of Parson Woodforde. (I'm not sure that it would have been good for my soul to be a country parson with a good living at the end of the 18th Century!).

The reality today is that Christian discipleship – and ministry in particular, is a way of life, not without scope for weariness and sorrow. Those of us who live on our own can sometimes feel that especially keenly when life is challenging and there is no one on hand at home to off-load to. But we must expect weariness and sorrow to be part of the blend – that's life. As

the psalmist observes *'The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.* (Psalm 90.10) What is crucial is that we stay *'in union with the Good Shepherd'*. (Introduction to the Seven Notes)

The spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius include frequent practice of 'the colloquy' - of talking to God informally about everything that is going on in our experience. Doing this doesn't just sustain us, it draws us closer to the one for whom we are one rather than two.

Maintaining faithfulness in prayer and fellowship with the community mean that we will be more receptive to the grace that *really can* enable us, in the words of the Note, to *'accept gladly our share of weariness and sorrow in the joyful spirit of the saints, and the faithful following of him who for the joy that was set before him endured the Cross.'*

I find those words very humbling and inspirational. They make me want to live in that joyful spirit of the Saints. They also pull me up short when I'm tempted to complain about my lot because I am directed to the plight of others and of Christ himself who loves me from his weariness and sorrow in such a wonderful way. Very occasionally, I glimpsed that truth with greater clarity and it fills me with joy.

The final section of Note Seven reminds us how those in service to the Lord Jesus who are trying to imitate his most holy life will want to respond in the face of others' needs:

'They will welcome any labour or sacrifice which will minister to the joy of others, looking toward that most blessed voice, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

Frankly, I don't always 'welcome any labour or sacrifice which will minister to the joy of others', but I wish I did, and that desire sometimes trumps my lethargy and disinclination. And I'm always glad when it does.

I'm sure that we in the Oratory find in the Seven Notes a treasure trove of wisdom and inspiration. For a number of us perhaps, it was reading The Notes that confirmed that, in the Oratory, we had found what we were looking for. But the Notes can be a blessing to other Christians too and

over the years I've shared them with a number of people in spiritual direction.

In particular, the note on Joy. One clergy widow, saddened by family discord, told me recently that she had been reciting the Note on Joy to herself three times a day and it had helped to put her into a very different place in herself.

Last year, I took the trouble of committing the Notes to memory. Perhaps others did that at the beginning of their Oratory life? Whatever, just as in the olden days, confirmands committed the Catechism to memory and, in our younger years, we all learned our times tables, to have the heart of our Rule instantly available would seem a very good thing indeed. In fact, I wonder whether recitation of the Notes from memory could be an appropriate element in our Rite of first profession

At any rate, I was glad that the Notes were available to me when I visited Norwich City Hospital on 7th February this year(2017). Our dear brother John Salt was in his last hours. Lindsay had visited him an hour or so before with the Sacrament, but when I arrived in the ward and explained who I was, a kindly young nurse took me to a small triangular shaped room where John lay peacefully alone. He had just died.

I was given a chair, and for the next three quarters of an hour I placed my hand on his forehead which was still warm. I thanked him for his life as a Christian; for his distinguished ministry in Africa and St.Helena and for his life as an Oratorian. Especially I thanked him for his wonderful warmth and humour, his infectious laugh - indeed, his Joy - which was such an attractive quality in him and which, I think, must have drawn many many people in God's direction during his long and distinguished ministry.

I recited some Psalms, and the Seven Notes ending with those final words: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

'Joy'! What a wonderful note to end on!