



One, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church
1 Pt 2:2-10; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; John 14:1-14
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (May 7, 2023)

Thomas Aquinas talks a lot about the joy of God. “Sheer joy is God’s and this demands companionship,” he tells us.¹ This means that joy is the very reason for the existence of the universe. The entire purpose of the universe is joy and spreading the joy. Is this one reason humans have come into the universe: to recognize and name and celebrate the joy at work everywhere?

Whose joy is this? God’s, the Creator’s joy. *And our own.* Who wants to be joyful alone? Sharing joy is intrinsic to joy. Living in the presence of God, enfolded in the mystery of God, requires awe at God’s creation, moments of sacred attunement to the beauty that surrounds us. Holiness, the sacredness of God manifested in creation, is discovered and touched in that awe.

And yet, evil is also part of our human experience. A Church that is gathered and made holy by the presence of the Lord, mourns the suffering of many in the world: those innocent ones targeted by the cruelty of people heartlessly promoting their own political agenda. Thirst for “more” possessions drives many to disregard the life of others.

One wonders why there should be some of us who have a pretty comfortable existence, some others who live in exceeding opulence, and others still who live an utterly miserable life. One also wonders why there should be such a marathon to accumulate to the point of hoarding perhaps out of fear that we won’t have enough and won’t survive another day (another hundred years?). One wonders what prompts the thirst for dominance and control over other people’s lives.

What causes one to live in anger and hatred, in disdain and distrust of others, demonizing and reducing others to non-humans?

What motivates politicians to outdo one another in meanness and disregard for other human beings and for nature? Again, is all that thirst for power, for creating for oneself a comfortable place, a way to build oneself a name to be reckoned with? And isn’t all this ultimately linked to anxiety, an existence based on fear of death and a desire to make ourselves live forever, an attempt at controlling life? Could our competitiveness a way to show our superiority, our invincibility, and therefore a way to convince ourselves that we are “more,” that we are “better,” that we are “holier,” by the way others are shown to be inferior, lacking, at fault, and impure?

So, the question we need to ask ourselves is: What are we anxious about? Don’t we trust God will give us all we need and more?

¹ Thomas Aquinas, 1 Sentences, 2.1.4.

If we trust God, then our question becomes: What's your yearning? What do you care for? What do you grieve for?

We grieve those we love. We don't grieve those we don't love. How deep is our grief, how wide our love?

To know God is to love God.² The same is for people: to love others we need to know them, to be exposed to them, to interact with them. How can we love those we don't know? How can we get to know them unless we are somehow exposed to them, to their life, their joys, their sorrows, their struggles? Do we not see them? Have we not caught up with Jesus' teaching that he is in the ones we rather not look at, the ones whose humanity is denied, the ones who have lost any resemblance of human existence? The servant of Yahweh was certainly treated that way and yet was capable of startling many!³

This closeness to God in the other prompts an ethical response. It generates prayer. Fr. Matthew Fox calls one of his books that way: Prayer, a radical response to life.⁴

When we witness the atrocities of the world and bring them to God in prayer, one profound and repeated question comes to surface: **"Why, God, do you allow this to happen? Where are you?"** That question is persistent, annoying, troubling, loud, piercing the heart of God. Those who have a feeling for the world cannot avoid it. It's there in front of our consciousness leaving us drenched in tears, voiceless.

But the more we consider and raise it up to God, the more we hear it directed back to us: **"Why do you allow it to happen? Where are you?"** Our prayer becomes a connecting bridge and an ethical challenge.

Some Christians seem to have **compassion deficit**. They seem to have hardened their hearts and become careless and even judgmental of the plight of suffering people. This callousness has led them to lose the capacity for caring and for lamenting injustices. Some Christians seem to pursue **happy thoughts only**. They want to experience the joy of Easter bypassing the terror and agony of Good Friday. Some Christians limit themselves to having a sideway glimpse at Jesus' wounds and then quickly skip over to the festive celebration of the resurrection.

The question we need to ask ourselves is "How do we show care, compassion, and solidarity with the millions of people abused and violated in an ongoing Good Friday?" In their bodies, Jesus is being crucified all over again. He said this himself: "You'll find me in the poor, the hungry, the sick, the prisoner." It's like hearing him say: "You'll find me in the ones who are victimized, blamed, and scapegoated because of your self-righteousness and lack of faith."

Rabbi Heschel teaches: The Biblical answer to evil is not the good but the holy. It is an attempt to raise humans to **a higher level of existence**, where one is not alone when confronted with evil. Living in 'the light of the face of God' bestows upon people a power of love that enables them to overcome the powers of evil. God's power of love gives people the strength and the courage to stand up for what is hoped for, to continue the struggle in the face of brutal and life-endangering opposition, to believe in the fuller and more abundant life of God's kingdom (John 10:10).

² 1 John 4:16

³ Isaiah 52:14-15 and Matthew 28:1-5 along with the rest of the resurrection appearances.

⁴ <https://www.amazon.com/Prayer-Radical-Response-Matthew-Fox/dp/1585420980>

Jesus starts today's gospel of John with the words "Do not let your heart be troubled." In the original Greek, the pronoun is plural (like "y'all") and the heart is singular. Jesus gives the disciples a unifying picture of themselves: though many, they share one heart. They are one community. Whatever may come they're in it together.

We affirm that in the Creed: We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

Here is only "one" true Church, the Body of Christ, undivided and uncorrupted. Yet, the Body of Christ is a traumatized and risen body, showing scars and the victory of resurrection at the same time. We are part of that Body with our scars and signs of resurrection in Christ.

The true Church in Christ, the one remaining solid on the foundation of the Lord, is made "holy" by the sanctifying presence of the Spirit, leading us in wisdom and power. Yet, it's made up of sinners sometimes resisting transformation, sometimes desiring sanctification.

The Church is catholic, that is universal and not simply local, with siblings all over the world. And yet, often provincial and inward focused, self-centered and stubborn.

And, finally, apostolic, which means we stick to the message of the Apostles. Or that is the idea. Often, we lack the boldness and courage to adhere to the promptings of the Spirit; we like the comfort of the status quo; we might complain that we do not inspire young families or even people in general to join us but we dread change that ushers us out of our comfort zone and does not align with our schedule.

The fact is, we tend to think our way of life is reality and that is fixed. Any change in life (perhaps when we lose a job or a loved one, during illness, at the birth of a child, or a major relocation) disrupts the life balance. However, the reality is life is transient, transition is reality and what we see all around us naturally changes.

The funny thing is we, at the same time, lament change and want to improve our lot. For that we need change.

In today's gospel, our (single) heart ought not to be troubled, Jesus tells us. Whatever strong winds and high seas we experience, individually and as a community, we are called to trust Jesus and believe his words. He spoke of this soon after he announced to his disciples that he was about to be arrested, tortured and murdered and they would disperse in terror. The Church, in other words, is born out of a traumatic experience and yet is invited to trust and act on the words and life of Jesus.

In the face of so much pain and mourning all around us, may we be the Church of Christ, holy, universal, apostolic, and united in his love around all those who suffer. Amen.