

The Lumen Action, par excellence: being Joyful!

Meditation for Lumen Summit, September 15, 2019

When I asked Fr. Mark what theme I should present for our brief meditation this morning, he told me it should be on “Lumen Action”; what we can practically *do* to enlighten leaders and influence culture. So, because of recent events in my life and the present day scandals in the Church, I thought of a quote by that brilliant but not too Christian German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche that addressed this concern. In “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”, Second Part, chapter 26, in the chapter titled (of all things!) “The Priests”, he wrote: *“For me to believe in their Redeemer, his disciples would have to look more redeemed!”* Now isn’t that true?! How in the world are we going to influence other people, much less evangelize them, if we are sullen gloom bearers, rain-on-my-parade types, or perhaps even worse, simply boring, skeptical, or disillusioned? It’s not going to work: we won’t look redeemed, because deep down, even if we are Christian or Catholic, we aren’t. So how do we, in Nietzsche’s words, look redeemed? There are surely many answers, but for this brief meditation today, I thought we could take our cue from Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She was fond of saying: *“Joy is the net that catches souls.”* There’s the rub: I think the greatest weapon a redeemed soul necessarily has in his arsenal is that of being joyful. St. Theresa of Avila once said: *a saint that is sad is one sad saint!* A great French Catholic 20th Century novelist, George Bernanos, projected this onto a national scale. He wrote: *“the contrary of a Christian nation is a sad nation”*; So are we joyful? In the midst of the hard times the Church is going through (and perhaps also ourselves in our personal lives), are we indomitably joyful?

There are not many rock solid truths that apply to all Christians and all spiritualities, but one is that a Christian should always be joyful. Not that he or she will always feel happy, but that deep down he should always experience a profound joy. This is at the very heart of authentic Christianity. A great proof of this can be seen at the very birth of Christianity. You know how Christianity started? With two heavenly words. If we remember, at the very beginning of Christianity we find the angel’s first words to Mary: “hail, full of grace”: *χαίρε*, and *κεχαριτωμενη*. *χαίρε* in English means “Hail”. Well, *Χαίρε* we usually translate as “hail” when it is used as a greeting, but probably it wasn’t the most normal greeting. That would have been “shalom”, which in Greek is not *χαίρε*, but *εἰρήνη*. The difference is that at the root of shalom is peace, but at the root of

Χαίρει is joy, because at its etymological root is χαρά, joy. Χαίρει then meant “greetings”, or “hail”, but with a sense of joyousness. So more correctly we would translate this not as “Hail, Mary”, but “Rejoice, Mary”.

The angel’s next word? κεχαριτωμενη we translate as “full of grace”, and that is well, because at the root of the word is χαρις, grace. Very literally translated it would read: “you who have been given the most grace”. Surprisingly, what do we find again in the middle of this word? χαρά, “joy”! because χαρις, grace for the Greeks, also comes from the root word χαρά, joy. So much so that we would not be pushing it too far if we were to translate these two compact words: “Rejoice, you who has been given most joy”!

There is something very profound here. At the very kick-off of our Christian culture, the first words from heaven are not “all-powerfulness”, or “peace”, or “righteousness”, or even “love”. Isn’t it amazing that in the first two words the angel uses, these words that are going to start everything, all our Christian faith, world, and culture, there is basically just “joy”?

If we continue the Christmas story in Luke, we find in the angels’ song, “*I bring to you tidings of great joy*”, the same word: ευλογιζομαι ημιν χαραν μεγαλην: the Christian message is basically a great joy! If we go to the other end of the Christian scriptural rainbow, we arrive to the Resurrection. To just use two examples: Luke 24:41, the apostles are so overjoyed they couldn’t even believe it (non credentibus prae gaudio –χαρά)! And in John 20:21, there is only one way the evangelist describes the disciples when they saw Jesus for the first time in the upper room: εχαρησαν. At the heart of the Christian message, at its beginning and end, the overwhelmingly powerful concept is joy.

I could go on and on about this (and I have in the past). For example, this does not mean that we should always be looking to be happy, or joyful: that could be nothing more than childish egoism. We should rather only look always for the good: this and this alone produces happiness, and the experience of happiness is joy. But since we have to keep this short, I would like to jump to an excellent article written by Fr. Paul Scalia, son of the late, great Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. The article is titled: “*The Church Militant or the Church Belligerent*”. In it, Fr. Scalia recommends that if we want to be true warriors, apostles, of the Church militant, and not just a bunch of belligerent complainers (which can be a temptation considering the present day crisis), one of the chief characteristics we must obtain is to be, in his words, “joyful warriors”. He gives the example of many “warrior saints” that, to our surprise and despite the harrowing conditions

they found themselves in , were always joyful in the midst of their battles. They were the modern day successors of , those great Old Testament warriors, the Maccabees, who "*carried on Israel's war joyfully*" (1 Macc. 3:2). They successfully united passion and efficacy for the faith with patience, understanding, and charity. He mentions St. Francis de Sales, St. Philip Neri, St. Thomas More, and more recently, St. Teresa of Calcutta. I would like to add to the list that great joyful warrior, St. John Paul II. We must be warriors, yes, but we must be joyful warriors. If we are not, then something is fundamentally wrong. Somewhere in our zeal we have forgotten to walk the path only toward the good, even and when that causes suffering, and have chosen the expedient, the easy or the politically correct path, that always leads to sadness, indifference, or at the worst, despair.

Joy is a positive, constructive, active passion. Being joyful and positive necessarily will lead us not to want to criticize and destroy, but to forgive and construct. St. Paul -psychologically speaking was probably one of the most belligerent saints who ever lived- learned that God had given him the authority, despite everything, "*to build up and not to tear down*". (2 Cor 13:10). That reminds me of an image that the great Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton once used to describe the Old Testament figure of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was no priest: he was a layman, governor of the province of Judah during the period of restoration after the Babylonian exile. He was no pushover: he had to battle against Israel's traditional enemies: Samaritans, Ammonites, Philistines, and besides had to do a work of purification of the Jewish people themselves: the people, but also their priests and levites, who had fallen into corruption and evil (sounds not too far from our condition today). But he also and primarily had a task of construction: he was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, promote the repopulation of the city, and, in general, reconstruct the city and its very culture. Chesterton used this image: "*A man building up a system has to build like Nehemiah, with the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. The imagination, the constructive quality, is the trowel, and argument is the sword.*" That seems so appropriate for us today in Lumen. We cannot lay down the sword of the truth, or we will be overcome. But neither can we lay down the trowel: if we do so, we leave behind nothing for our children and our country.

If we want to be true apostles, do true Lumen Action that will actually work, let us remember this: to be always manfully joyful, and not forget to take up not only the sword, but also the trowel.