

THE APOSTLE OF JOY

BY

VINCENT KERNS, M.S.F.S.

JOY', wrote G. K. Chesterton on the last page of *Orthodoxy*, 'is the gigantic secret of the Christian'. One of the greatest possessors of this secret was that gentle and genial bishop, St Francis de Sales¹. 'God is the God of joy', he wrote; 'the spirit of joy is the true spirit of devotion'.

The worldly connotation of devotion is a dismal one. The opening chapters of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* were intended to dispel that erroneous opinion. The way of the soul to God should be one of joy; indeed it can only be one of joy, for sadness and melancholy are diametrically opposed to the happiness that comes from drawing near to God. 'I cannot conceive', Francis wrote to a saddened soul, 'how you can let your heart be filled with such deep sorrow, considering you are a child of God, entrusted to his loving kindness, and consecrated to his love'.

There is nothing sombre about the religion of St Francis de Sales. As he once observed in a sermon: 'If you have a sorrowful face at the conclusion of your prayers it is a clear sign that you have not prayed as you ought to have done'. The soul, like the flower, must turn to the sunlight of joy or else it withers and dies. The heart, like the flower, cannot open in the dark. So we find the Saint laying down in the *Treatise on the Love of God* the principle that 'joy opens the heart and sadness shuts it'.

Joy and devotion go hand in hand. Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Ghost which charity sows in our hearts. To be good one must have charity; but to be devout, charity alone is not sufficient; 'a great alacrity and readiness in carrying out the actions prompted by charity' are also necessary.

Charity and devotion are not really distinct; one is merely the greater degree of the other. 'Charity and devotion differ no more the one from the other, than the flame from the fire; inasmuch as charity, being a spiritual fire, when it breaks out into flame, is called devotion'.

Hence joy is an indispensable condition for leading the devout life. To be devout is to be happy—St Francis could not insist on this too much. The description of devotion and its effects on the soul, as set forth in the *Introduction*, reads strangely like St Paul's eulogy of charity in his Letter to the Corinthians.

¹ His feast day is kept on January 29.

'Sugar sweetens unripe fruits, and corrects the rawness and unwholesomeness of those which are fully ripe. Now devotion is the true spiritual sugar which takes away what is bitter in mortification and what may be hurtful in consolation; it takes away discontent from the poor and anxiety from the rich, desolation from the oppressed and insolence from the favoured, sadness from the solitary and dissipation from him that is in company. It serves for fire in winter and for dew in summer; it knows how to abound and how to suffer need; it renders equally profitable honour and contempt; it receives pleasure and pain with a heart almost always the same, and fills us with a wonderful delight'.

So St Francis was constantly fighting sadness in all its forms, both in his personal direction and in his public writings. 'Sadness is always unprofitable and in contradiction to the service of God' is the theme of the last chapter in the eleventh book of the *Treatise*. This chapter is particularly interesting because in it he gives three reasons for the appearance of depression in the soul. It comes from the devil or from a naturally melancholy disposition or from the rebuffs of fate.

St Francis describes the devil's activity as follows: 'He overwhelms them (the emotions) with doubts, with feelings of aversion and jealousy, with groundless fears over past sins, and with so many trivial, bitter and melancholy fantasies that the soul turns away from all reason and consolation'.

A melancholy disposition may not be morally blameworthy, since it can arise from natural physical causes. But it gives the devil an opening for laying his snares. In cloudy weather, as Francis characteristically remarks, flies drop most easily into the spider's web.

The various accidents of life affect everybody. Good and bad people alike suffer from natural causes. But while the devout, as a result of their union with God, can overcome the effects of the outer world, the others are too weak to resist. 'These people are like monkeys and marmots which, when the moon wanes, are in a melancholy and depressed mood, but when it waxes they frisk about and dance and make buffooneries'.

The best remedy for sadness is to turn immediately and calmly to God, putting all melancholy thoughts out of our minds, as we should impure ones; because once the imagination takes hold of them, they are made to seem a thousand times worse than they really are. Our prayers should not be about our unhappy state, but rather acts of confidence and love. 'It is better to turn away our soul from its sadness when we speak with God, and let it dwell on other things, not on pain . . . because this will only remind us of our pain anew'. 'So as to divert the soul from its thoughts', one should 'busy oneself

with every sort of external work'. All will be well if we remember how trivial the incidents of this life are when compared with the life to come.

'And finally, in all the sadness which may come upon us, we must employ the authority of the superior will to do all that should be done in favour of divine love. There are indeed actions which so depend on bodily disposition and constitution that we have not the power to do them just as we please: for the melancholy-disposed cannot keep their eyes, or their words, or their faces, in the same good grace and sweetness as they would do if they were relieved from this bad humour; but they are quite able, though without the good grace, to say gracious, kind and civil words, and, in spite of inclination, to do what reason requires as to words and works of charity, gentleness and condescension. We may be excused for not being always bright, for one is not master of cheerfulness to have it when one will; but we are not excusable for not being always gracious, yielding and considerate; for this is always in the power of our will, and we have only to determine to keep down the contrary humour and inclination'.

'I cannot understand', says Francis, 'how souls that have given themselves to divine goodness can ever fail to be joyful; for is there any happiness like this?' Time after time, in his letters, St Francis encourages his correspondents to 'Be joyful' or 'Live joyfully!' For, after all, joy is the result of a loving conformity of our will with God's. When we love nothing but God, provided his will is done, we are perfectly happy. Sadness, on the contrary, indicates that the conformity is not yet perfect.

Joyful holiness was the motto of St Francis de Sales; and that is the only true holiness. The story is told of the Saint that he heard one day of a man who led a saintly life but who nevertheless always looked sorrowful. 'A sad saint', was his quiet rejoinder, 'is a sorry saint'. (*Un saint triste est un triste saint.*)

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.

Sir,—As a frequent visitor to Einsiedeln in recent years, may I be permitted to protest strongly against the article by H. C. Graef in your November number?

Anyone who is bold or rash enough to ask a serious periodical to publish the impressions received during a 36-hour visit might at least trouble to get the facts right. For example, it is just not true that the Mass in the 'Gnadenkapelle' is always that of Our Lady; the votive Mass is forbidden on all doubles of the first class