How to be happy in an unhappy world: what is the happiness of Christians? How is the possibility of human happiness related to Christian faith?

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Let us begin with a story, a true story that comes to us from Frank Sheed (d. 1982) who was allegedly the first Catholic layman to obtain a doctorate in theology. Sheed wrote an autobiography entitled *The Church and I* and in this narrative, he recounts a story which tells about a man who had become a Catholic while in Hyde Park listening to talks and sermons that were being given by a priest about the truths of the Catholic faith. This man had a teenage daughter who became mortally ill with a disease that is normally quite painful to endure. Distressed for fear of the suffering that his daughter would go through, he prayed that Our Lord would spare his daughter the suffering that she would normally endure. He asked Our Lord to give to him his daughter's suffering and so this man's daughter died suffering little discomfort. Then, shortly after she died, he contracted the same ailment from which he died. He died in great pain but overjoyed knowing that his daughter had not suffered. Hence, we have a story which would appear to conflate the experience of suffering (physical suffering) with the experience of a species of inner joy which transcends the kind of sensations that are known and experienced at a physical level. Happiness appears to be something that can exist in conjunction with the passion of suffering. According to its etymological roots, the passion of suffering refers to something that is undergone. It is something which is endured. It exists as a reception. Normally, as human beings, we do not go out to engage in acts of suffering. Normally, suffering does not exist as an activity. We attempt to achieve other goals and objectives though we often know that the experience of suffering often comes with our attempts. Some kind of self-sacrifice will be needed and the kind of self-denial that we experience comes across to us as an experience of suffering.

Another story comes to mind. A few years ago, at the University of Montreal (in Montreal), a random mass shooting occurred. In the cafeteria, a woman was having coffee with her daughter and then the shooting began. The mother responded by immediately grabbing her daughter shoving her down on the floor and covering her daughter's body with her own body to protect her own daughter from harm. Apparently the mother's action was not premeditated or thought out beforehand. She immediately sensed harm to her daughter and immediately took action to save her daughter. I cannot know or say if this woman was happy to make this kind of sacrifice. She seems to have done what she did willingly. She was not forced or compelled. If we would have to try and come up with an explanation, we would have to refer to the power of love and how love exists as a power which transcends death and the fear that we would normally have of death.

Let us take a look at this thing called happiness and see if we can make sense of it within a tradition of thought that extends back in time to the kind of discussion that we can find in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle and his treatise on friendship. In the philosophy of Aristotle, happiness becomes an object of focus and inquiry (perhaps for the first time) and, in the wake of these reflections, we find reverberations that have emerged in the history of subsequent reflection, echoes and consequences finding their place in the subsequent development of theology within the Catholic world.

As a kind of pointer, let us look at where happiness exists in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas in the context of his monumental *Summa Theologiae* (the "Summary of Theology"), his greatest most ambitious work.

Where the first part of the *Summa* (the *Prima Pars*) speaks about God and the way that "creatures proceed from God,"[1] he second part (the *Secunda Pars*, the *Prima Secundae*) speaks "about the movement of the rational creature toward God"[2] which, as rational, includes angels and human beings. The *Prima Secundae* moves "from the human being's natural desire for God to the inbreak of the gospel of Christ."[3] The first five questions speak about the final goal of life which Aquinas identifies as essentially an activity, an activity which moves and adheres to God through knowing and loving: "...man and other rational creatures attain to their last end by knowing and loving God."[4] Acquiring this goal constitutes the **happiness** (*beatitudo*) of both men and angels both in terms of act or activity and also in terms of consummation, a consummation of activity. Happiness is defined initially by the process of uniting one's self to God and then, finally, by achieving full union with God. As St. Augustine teaches, in agreement with Aristotle, all human beings desire happiness (*De Trinitate*, xiii, 3, 4). Our human happiness can only truly emerge if, by some means, we are able to share in God's immortality. Without immortality, no one can be completely or truly happy.[5] Complete or true happiness is supposed to be something that lasts forever. Hence, in order to grasp how union with God is possible (how it can occur), subsequent discussions speak about the means: how to attain union with God as the fulfillment of our desires for happiness.[6] For the sake of a fuller more well grounded discussion, a human psychology which speaks about the normative structure or the inner principles of our human life.[7] The cultivation of recurrent patterns of activity in good habits or dispositions gives a form to our human life. It grounds a life that is given over to a recurrent actuation of good deeds.[8] The recurrence reveals virtue, the presence of virtue as an operative habit in how we conduct our lives.[9] Virtue is a good habit which ensures a good, prompt performance of certain deeds.[10] Exterior

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1Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas Volume 1 The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 149.

2Torrell, *Aquinas Vol. 1*, p. 148.

3Patrick Hannon, "Aquinas, Morality and Law," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 56 (1990): 279.

4Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 1, a. 8; trans. in five vols. as *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1981) 1, p. 589 (hereafter cited as the "*Summa Theologiae*" followed by technical reference to the original, and if a translation has been used, by the volume and page of the English translation).

5St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 13, 11; trans. as *The Trinity* by Edmund Hill, O.P. (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1990), p. 351 (hereafter cited as the "*De Trinitate*" followed by technical reference to the original, and if a translation has been used, by the volume and page of the English translation).

6Torrell, *Aquinas Vol. 1*, p. 149.

7Thomas Franklin O'Meara, O.P., *Thomas Aquinas Theologian* (Notre Dave and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 60-2.

8*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 55; cf. 1a2ae, q. 50, a. 5 & ad 3. Please note that Aquinas's understanding of habit is not understood if one confuses a common meaning for habit with that of *habitus*. Quoting Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas Volume 2 Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), p. 264, "habit is a mechanism incapable of being renewed; *habitus*, on the contrary, is the capacity of adaptation and extension to the ever new, which perfects the faculty in which it arises and gives it a perfect liberty, a source of true delight in action."

9*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 55, a. 2.

10*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 55, a. 3; q. 56, a. 3; q. 107, a. 4; q. 110, a. 2.

principles which refer to God's divine presence and his solicitude for us through God's providential government work to form and nurture the actuation of our human lives within a wider, larger context. Law as this exists within the created order of things and grace as this exists as a species of supernatural gift function as the means of instruction which God has established for our benefit of human beings as an antidote or corrective for problems which ensue as a result of the existence of evil, sin.[11]

With respect to possible determinations or how we can get a sense about what is human happiness versus the happiness that belongs to other kind of being (a Buddhist prayer often says or asks: "let all creatures be happy"), an understanding of human happiness follows from an understanding about what it means to be human. Understand the nature of our humanity and we position ourselves to understand the kind of happiness which properly belongs to us. Hence, in the wake of this kind of thinking, Aquinas notes in various texts that what makes a human person to be specifically human is the human ability to engage in acts of reasoning which lead to understanding. As Aquinas argues: human happiness is principally grounded in the human exercise of man's highest and most noble power or faculty, the activities of the human intellect when engaged in a theoretical form of reasoning which leads to true understanding and knowledge.[12] "Man as such is a rational being."[13] Hence, since the proper pleasures of our human life pertain to acts of reasoning which lead us toward understanding, temperance, as a virtue, is not to be exercised in trying to restrain human beings from engaging in any acts of reasoning that lead to understanding. Restraints need to be applied only against inclinations which come from the being of a biological or an animal nature.[14] They have no other place or role.

> To explain a bit more Aquinas's position, reason explains how one can distinguish between the "actions of a man" and a man's "human actions" or "human actions ordered to an end." Distinguish here between acts performed by a human being and acts which are intrinsically human. When, for instance, a man raises his hand to shoo a fly, he is a human being who assuredly engages in an act. However, to the degree that his act is a function of biological purpose and instinct (or to the degree that it is an unthinking action), it is not properly a *human* act. All human acts are acts performed by human beings but not all acts performed by human beings rank as truly human acts. A genuinely human act is an act that has been pondered and thought about.[15] It is informed by reason since it emerges as the fruit of a process of learning and reflection, and this deliberation, to the extent of its reasonableness, functions as a basic premiss to explain why potential actions performed by a human agent can be transformed into actions that are all intrinsically human, human precisely because they possess a freedom and goodness that is grounded in and defined by the deliberations of our human reason.[16] *Homo maxime est mens hominis*.[17] A man, a human being, is principally his or her

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11*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, Prologue.

12*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 3, a. 5.

13*Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 141, a. 1, ad 1.

14*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 95, a. 1

15Aquinas, *Sentencia Libri De anima*, 1, 1, 3.

16Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*, q. 24, a. 1; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 48, 3; *Sentencia Libri De anima*, 1, 1, 8; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, prologue.

17*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 29, a. 4, cited by Frederick E. Crowe, S.J., "The Origin and Scope of Bernard Lonergan's *Insight*," *Appropriating the Lonergan Idea*, ed. Michael Vertin (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), p. 27.

> mind. The reasonableness and rationality of our human reason, its proper functioning, measures the height and breath of authentic human living since it is only by means of reason and the self-reflection of reason that human beings can know that they can govern themselves by determining alternatives from which one can choose which action is to be put into effect.[18] At a certain point, within deliberation, within reason, persons realize that they are truly responsible for the actions which they engage in and for the kind of person that they thus become as a consequence of what they do. A properly human act is self-determinative. Hence, "only that is said to act which has dominion over its action."[19] Reason successfully converts actions that are merely actions into acts which are intrinsically human (and, because they are human, moral). Human action and moral action always refer to the same reality.[20] An act can be identical *as a purely natural act* but, as one attends to the different contexts within which acts occur, one finds significant moral differences. The absence of reasonableness in one context changes an act that is performed by human beings into an act that is less than human while the presence of reasonableness converts an act into an expression of human behavior which leads to many good consequences and results.[21]

However, having noted that there is reason for claiming that an intimate relation exists between the realization of our rational human potential as human beings and the experience of human happiness, please let us advert to the fact that an abstractness easily creeps into this kind of correlation. A simple take on Aristotle's notion of who a human being is commonly states that man is a "rational animal." However, if we focus on this type of definition somewhat narrowly, it can suggest to us that a human being exists as a kind of machine. In our human culture, notions of rationality exist which are divorced from other aspects that belong to the fullness of our human existence (the fullness of human cognition). In the context of European philosophy in the wake of the kind of philosophy that comes to us from Descartes, we have an understanding of human cognition that is determined by principles which refer to the basic principles of our human reason. We think, for instance, about the principles of identity, excluded middle, and contradiction and we know that these principles were identified by Aristotle in the context of his own thought, day, and time. However, if you take these principles in a way which separates our human intellectual activity from the kind of activity which exists in our human acts of sense and if you are not able to speak about an ongoing form of interaction that exists between our acts of sense and our acts of understanding through the kind of mediation which exists in the kinds of questions which we ask as human beings, a truncated understanding of rationality tends to be the unfortunate result. A mechanical view of human cognition is encouraged and, from a mechanical view of human cognition, we easily move toward a mechanical view of the human person and the nature of our human existence. Certain dimensions or other features that belong to the nature of our human existence are overlooked and they are not attended to. Yes, indeed, where Aristotle speaks about the primacy of intellectual life in the context of who or what a human being is, he also admits that human beings engage in other kinds of activity which do not appear to be specific to other living beings. In a manner which is peculiar to the nature of our human existence, human beings are able to laugh and they are also able to make jokes and tell them to others. They are able to make light of the nature of

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18*De Veritate*, q. 5, a. 5, ad 4; *Sentencia Libri De anima*, 3, 16, 840; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 19, a. 12, ad 3.

19*De Veritate*, q. 5, a. 9, ad 4; 1, p. 243.

20*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 1, a. 3.

21*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 18, a. 5, ad 3; *De Malo*, q. 2, a. 4.

their human existence and the circumstances of their current human existence and so, in doing this, they can introduce a measure of distance into the conduct of their individual lives. Human beings can stand back from how they are experiencing their lives and, in their humor, through the self-transcendence which exists within their humor, they can point to the presence and the identity of irrational variables over which they might not have any control although the human experience of humor can also reveal to human beings where oversights exist or omissions exist within their personal understanding and how they assume or not assume a measure of personal responsibility for the conduct of their lives. My best example here, one which comes immediately to mind, is the humor of St. Thomas More as he approached the time and event of his execution. He asked for help to climb up onto the platform where he was to be killed and in asking for help, he noted that no concern should be shown about how we would come down from the platform after his execution. He asked that he be allowed to fend for himself. When the executioner offered to blindfold him, More said that he would do this himself and, indeed, he blindfolded himself. But after he had stretched his head over the low block—it was merely a log of wood—he made a signal to the man, the executioner, to wait a moment. Then he made his last joke: His beard was lying on the block and he would like to remove it. At least it, the beard, had committed no treason. It had not offended the King. In another story about another man, some years ago, when listening to the CBC radio, I heard a story about a famous Jewish German comedian who, in Germany, was shot by a firing squad around the time of the Second World War. They had taken off all his clothes and as they were taking him to the place of execution to be shot, he noticed a firing squad of men lined up to shoot him. And, as he passed them, he turned to them and said "kiss my posterior." In these cases then and in other similar stories, we find a sense of the current moment in the context of our lives and an apprehension of things that is able to point to a species of ridiculousness which points to the presence of irrationality within our human life. In a way, in humor, we find social criticism but of a kind that can make a point and not too grossly offend. A story is told about Henry Kissinger. We recall the unfortunate incident when a Korean airliner was shot down by a Soviet fighter. Not long afterwards, Kissinger encountered Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko. I am not sure if it is Gromyko but it was a high ranking Soviet official. Gromyko apparently asked Kissinger if he had had a safe, uneventful arrival flight using air travel and Kissinger remarked: "Yes, I avoided taking Korean Airlines." Gromyko was forced to laugh at the joke although the point of it could not have been missed. In humor then, there exists a relief from tension and the introduction of a species of freedom that can transcend lamentable conditions whether we refer to lamentable material conditions or limitations which exist within the human soul. Whenever, within the cognitive order of things, lack of rationality is encountered, through humor (its experience and reception) this irrationality is noticed and it is communicated and, as an immediate effect, a new context is created which offers or creates a set of new conditions. Various forms of self-reflection can begin to occur and, from the introduction of a new line of questioning, thinking, and imagining, we can have changes in the kinds of apprehensions which we can have within the cognitive order of our human existence.

To summarize a few points about the meaning and place of happiness, (1) a first point admits that happiness is related to the good of self-fulfillment. If human beings can realize their potential as human beings, this should make them happy. A truncated form of existence is something which suggests that such a form of life cannot lead to happiness or square with the existence of happiness. (2) Second, while a certain kind of Aristotelian interpretation associates happiness with the condition and the being of human rationality, a more nuanced understanding of human happiness should realize that happiness is more proximately grounded in experiences of goodness. The experience of rationality in our human cognition exists, of course, as an essentially good thing. Goodness, the presence of goodness, is determined or measured by the presence or the existence of intelligibility. It is said that

being, the intelligibility of being, is interchangeable with the being or the presence of goodness. However, with respect to goodness, if we attend to a kind of shift that moves from the cognitional or the intellectual order of things to the moral or existential order of things, apprehensions of goodness tend to exist within the context of our moral human lives. Experiences of understanding exist as good things and the kind of human world which can be created in the wake of our understanding also exists as a good thing. There is intelligibility in goodness but goodness exists as something that is more concrete than the experience of intelligibility. Perhaps we can say that the goodness of intelligibility and knowledge extends and expresses itself – it becomes more concrete through how all of our human actions can cooperate with the intelligibility that exists in understanding. From the experience of goodness thus, happiness exists as a derivative. (3) Third, happiness cannot be directly sought or acquired through the doing of a human act which immediately produces happiness. Yes, we all want to be happy. But, despite how much we want to be happy, we cannot make ourselves happy. As, similarly, we cannot produce acts of understanding (understanding always exists as a reception, as a species of gift), so too with the experience of happiness. It exists as a by-product and, if we try and convert happiness into an objective that we can directly seek and aim for, we will be tempted to engage in actions that will not ultimately lead to happiness. We would be open to actions which would exist as "quick fixes." And, we should all know at our current stages in life, that "quick fixes" do not work. They tend not to know about the existence of long term goods and the goods that are effected by quick fixes tend not to last and to endure. We are left with a greater sense of emptiness and a lack of meaning in our lives. The fragility, in inadequacy of "quick fixes" best points to the shortsightedness of pragmatism as an adequate philosophy and guide for the living of our human lives.