

Living Joyfully in a Stressed-Out World



Christopher News Notes

HAPPINESS, WE ALL KNOW, IS FLEETING. It hinges on circumstances, mood, even something as transitory as weather. And the everyday stresses of family life, school, work, even leisure can leave us dispirited and empty. Being happy all the time in a stress-filled world is simply not possible. But joy—real joy!—is more than temporary happiness. It's a wellspring of peace, health, and delight, a gift of the Holy Spirit. How can we access it?

Recognizing Joy

"Find out where joy resides, and give it a voice far beyond singing. For to miss the joy is to miss all."

—Robert Louis Stevenson

The first step in living joyfully is recognizing what joy is and where it comes from. We start with what joy isn't: material, selfish, temporary. True joy is spiritual (in the sense that it is experienced by body, mind, and soul in harmony). Joy is selfless; in joy we literally lose ourselves and experience the communion with others that is real community. And joy is eternal, because it is the foretaste of heaven in the here and now.

Joy is fully alive. A person who lives joyfully is never bored, indifferent, or lukewarm. The Jesuit spiritual writer Henri Nouwen talked about joy as holy ecstasy. In his book "Lifesigns," he wrote, "The word 'ecstasy' helps us to understand more fully the joy that Jesus offers. To be ecstatic literally means to be outside of a static place...Joy is always connected with movement, renewal, rebirth, change—in short, with life."

When Olympic swimmer Missy Franklin began experiencing panic attacks in the pool at the 2016 Rio games, it affected both her performance and her joy in a sport that had been the center of her life. Franklin wasted no time getting treatment for her anxiety (a critically important step) and is dedicated to regaining not just her career but her joy.

"I'm determined to rediscover the joy of swimming that helped me to win all those medals in London, putting up times that still stand as world records, Olympic records," Franklin said. "I don't feel that joy right now, but I know it's in me. Deep down. Somewhere. I need only to tap back into it, embrace it, make it once again my own." And on Twitter, she shared the message, "[I'm] trusting in the Lord that something BEAUTIFUL will come out of this, and that I will come back stronger than ever."

A paradox of living joyfully is that it can—and often must—coincide with living through stress, difficulty, loss, and pain. Sadness leaves no room

Five Ways to Jump Start Joy

- 1. Count your blessings.** Make it a practice to find, in every circumstance, at least one thing to be grateful for. Thankfulness is not always easy, but journalist Joyce Coronel stresses that it's "a mindset that changes our perspective for the better."
- 2. Laugh.** Truly, a healthy sense of humor lessens the gravity of many everyday stressors. "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly," wrote the witty and wise G.K. Chesterton.
- 3. Go to confession.** The burden of guilt is one of the biggest inhibitors of true joy. Avail yourself of the mercy of the confessional. "Through the apostolic ministry," Pope Francis reminds us, "the mercy of God reaches me, my faults are forgiven, and joy is bestowed on me."
- 4. Pray the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary.** Many of us turn to our Mother of Sorrows in troubled times. But Mary is also venerated as "Cause of Our Joy." Ask her intercession in discovering or recovering your own joy in Christ.
- 5. Seek help when you need it.** Sadness is a natural reaction to loss. But an inability to experience joy, even in good times, is a warning sign of clinical depression and other illnesses, physical or mental. If you have lost your joy and can't find it when you try other remedies, please see a counselor or your physician. Help and hope are there.

for happiness, but sorrow and joy can and do coexist in our lives. We may not see it clearly at the time, but the undercurrent of joy sustains us in the heavy waters of daily life.

People who face serious health challenges are often surprised to encounter joy in the very midst of fear and pain. *Fox Business News* reporter Gerri Willis spoke for many when she said her battle with breast cancer left her with an unexpected gift: "Cancer is a great teacher. And...what I now know is this: challenges like the one I've faced shouldn't be feared but faced directly because there is good in every journey...Sure, I had a good cry when I was diagnosed, but there were so many bright spots, funny events, and beauty along the way. This surprise by joy is one of the greatest gifts I've ever been given even though I had to fight a health demon to receive it."

The gift of joy, like all good gifts, comes from God as an assurance of His love. It is available to us always; we need but to acknowledge it. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find.

To those who knock it is opened."

Seizing Joy

"He that kisses the Joy as it flies / Lives in Eternity's sunrise."

—William Blake

The second key to living joyfully is to remember that, as with physical well-being, there are attitudes and practices we need to make a part of our daily routines. The more we engage in them (and root out the opposite of those qualities), the more easily we can tap into the power of joy.

In recent discussions published as "The Book of Joy," the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Tibetan Buddhist leader the Dalai Lama list eight "pillars of joy": qualities that both cultivate real joy and are the identifying marks of joyful people. These qualities are echoed in all religious and philosophical traditions.

They are 1) Perspective—The ability to see situations from many viewpoints; 2) Humility—A grounded understanding of our own limitations; 3) Humor—The ability to take ourselves and our circumstances lightly; 4) Acceptance—What

Christians call an attitude of surrender to the will of God; 5) Forgiveness—The ability to let go of grudges and past hurts; 6) Gratitude—The recognition that all of life, no matter what the circumstances, is a gift; 7) Compassion—The understanding that we do not suffer alone, and that joy is selfless; and 8) Generosity—The spirit of “a cheerful giver.”

How many of these “eight pillars” do we practice intentionally? How much of a difference would it make to cultivate joy in a conscious way – to pursue it with as much purpose as we do happiness or success?

Living and Giving Joy

“Resolve to keep happy, and your joy and you shall form an invincible host against difficulties.”

—Helen Keller

Tapping into real joy has the power to change lives – our own, and others’. Joy is the light that can’t be hidden under a bushel basket. It shines forth from us, and draws others to us. Living joyfully also can’t be contained. It spills over into sharing the secret of our joy.

“I’m amused at the Dunkin’ Donuts advertisements that urge you to ‘share the joy,’” wrote National Review Online editor-at-large Kathryn Jean Lopez in a reflection for the *Abilene Reporter-News*. “I won’t deny that if you bring a dozen or so doughnuts to work, you’ll bring some cheer, or at least a possibly needed sugar rush. But true

joy—the knowledge of God’s transcendent love—is transformative in the extreme.”

One way that joy transforms us is by moving us toward others in a way that builds the life-enhancing bonds of community and personal connection. The converse is also true: reaching out to help others brings us joy. “A funny thing happens when we decide to serve others,” journalist Joyce Coronel notes. “We forget about ourselves. And forgetting about ourselves is a good thing. It’s also the exact opposite of what our culture preaches. Serving others with no expectation of anything in return brings us joy and healing in a way that nothing else does.”

After a tough start to the 2016-2017 season, the Detroit Red Wings hockey team discovered the truth of Coronel’s advice. A Christmas visit to the Children’s Hospital of Michigan, an annual tradition for the team, quickly restored perspective to players’ sagging spirits.

“Hockey doesn’t really mean all that much in the grand scheme of things,” said goalie Jimmy Howard. “There are a lot of people in this world that are going through much worse. It’s tough to see what these families and children are dealing with, but at the same time it’s always rewarding to be able to give them a few moments of joy and excitement.”

And in giving joy, the team received. “If we can go in and help put a smile on their face, I think it’s a great, great thing,” said Coach Jeff Blashill. “It’s tough emotionally, but you gain joy from seeing the joy on their faces.”

In other words, joy breeds joy. So pass it on!


“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

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Editor-in-Chief: Tony Rossi

The Christophers

5 Hanover Square, New York, NY 10004

212-759-4050 • 888-298-4050

mail@christophers.org • www.christophers.org

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“Joy is the result of a human-divine communion, and aspires to a communion ever more universal...Joy gives the heart a catholic openness to the world of people, at the same time that it wounds the heart with a longing for eternal bliss.”

—Blessed Pope Paul VI, “On Christian Joy”