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Too few people realize that cheerfulness is a virtue that can and should be acquired by every Christian. Read about it, and see if you possess it.



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HOW TO BE CHEERFUL

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One of the signs of moral sickliness in today's world is the lack of what may be called the virtue of cheerfulness in many people. We do not speak of those extreme cases in which this lack takes the form of the mental disease called melancholia, for the cure of which drastic measures must be attempted. We are referring to the thousands of otherwise normal people who present a consistently glum, gloomy, mopy attitude toward life and everybody around them. They have never learned why or how to be cheerful.

Some of these gloomy persons will, when checked or admonished in any friendly way, rise quickly to a defense of their lack of cheerfulness. The defense may take different forms.

For some its basis is self-pity. Their sorrows and misfortunes overwhelm them. "How can I be cheerful," they say, "when I have so much to suffer?" Widows who have lost their husbands, perhaps years before, are subject to this kind of defense. Also business men who have never realized their ambitions to reach the top in income and position.

Others defend their gloominess on the ground that the world is in a mess, that war may break out at any time, that nuclear bombs may fall at any moment. "How can I be cheerful," they say, "when the whole world may blow up around me?"

Still others are prompted by envy to refuse even an effort at being cheerful. They are always sad because they are always thinking of the many good things others have which they are denied. "How can I be cheerful," they say, "when so many worse people than I am have so many better things to enjoy?"

Finally, some defend their lack of cheerfulness on the ground of their *feelings*. Temperamentally they are inclined toward sadness, and they take the position that they should let their temperament rule them. They say: "I don't *feel* cheerful, and therefore I would be a hypocrite if I acted as if I were cheerful."

Despite these, and any other defenses that may come to the minds of gloomy people, this statement can be made and proved: cheerfulness is a virtue; therefore it is a habit that can

be acquired; furthermore, when correctly defined and understood, it is a virtue that every human being should try to acquire.

That it may be correctly understood, cheerfulness should be analyzed under the headings:

1. Definition and explanation of cheerfulness.
2. The basis of cheerfulness.
3. Defects of cheerfulness.
4. Aids to cheerfulness.

1. DEFINITION

The English word cheerfulness is perhaps best represented, in the classic Latin listings of virtues, by the word *affabilitas*, which has as its obvious English translation, *affability*.

St. Thomas Aquinas places affability, which we are calling "cheerfulness," under the general heading of

the cardinal virtue of justice. In this very general sense, justice is the virtue that prompts us to give to others what is their due under any sense of duty or obligation.

Thus, for example, under justice come such virtues as religion (giving to God the honor and service due to Him from His creatures); patriotism (giving to one's country the love and service that it deserves); love of parents and family, etc. In its strictest sense, justice means respecting the rightful possessions of others.

Among the virtues that in some way fulfill the general definition of justice (giving to others what is due to them under any title), St. Thomas places affability. We are obliged to help and not hinder others around us in the world on their way toward heaven. We are to help the needy by our alms; we are to help the erring by

our urgings that they give up evil. We also have the obligation to help all whom we know or meet by our kindness, pleasantness, affability of manner. This last is the virtue of *cheerfulness*.

The fact need hardly be labored that cheerfulness of attitude and manner is a great help to those who come into contact with us. A sour, silent, grumpy-looking person makes us feel uneasy, and intensifies our own temptations to give way to sadness. A cheerful person lifts up our spirits, invites our confidence, increases our hope of serving God well. This last is especially true in the case of persons who suffer under handicaps and misfortunes and yet remain cheerful. Such are a real tonic to our own spirits.

2. BASIS OF CHEERFULNESS

While it could hardly be said that cheerfulness is one of the most impor-

tant of the virtues, it can be said that it is a manifestation of other virtues that are exceedingly important for the salvation of one's soul. Three such important virtues come together to make a person cheerful in the true sense of the word. Again it must be repeated that cheerfulness can be acquired; and it will be acquired in the measure that these three important virtues that underlie it are put into practice.

1) The first is the virtue of *hope*. This is a supernatural virtue infused at baptism, but it requires study, effort, repeated actions to become effective. It is the virtue by which we keep our eyes fixed on heaven as the goal of our lives, made certainly attainable by the merits and promises and fidelity of Jesus Christ. With the virtue of hope one always has something wonderful to look forward to, and this is an indispensable condition of cheerfulness.

Anyone who succumbs to the vices opposed to hope will find it impossible to be truly cheerful. Despair is a vice opposed to hope; it is surrender to the thought that heaven cannot be attained, and that the sufferings of hell are inevitable. Gloom is the first fruit of despair.

Secularism is also a vice opposed to hope; it is the belief that there is no happiness beyond the grave, and that one must capture every possible delight here in this world. It leads to sadness and lack of cheerfulness because there are no delights in this world that can fully satisfy the human heart. It also leads to other well-known causes of sadness, such as envy, avarice, impurity.

2) The second virtue that must be cultivated as a basis of cheerfulness is *fortitude*. This is the virtue that induces one to face the inevitable sorrows of life, and above all death itself

in the service of God, with courage and patience. Fortitude looks to the sufferings of Christ on His cross, and counts its own as small in comparison. Fortitude, combined with hope, looks to the happiness of heaven, and counts even the worst sufferings as a small price to pay for that inconceivable reward.

The vices opposed to fortitude are especially cowardice, self-pity and lack of trust in the goodness of God. Wherever you find these vices, you find people who cannot be cheerful. They are constantly grumbling against God and everybody around them because of the sufferings they have to endure.

3) The third virtue on which cheerfulness is built is that of *fraternal charity*. This is the virtue by which, for the love of God, we love and want to help all our neighbors, especially those whose lives are in some way in-

termingled with our own. As has been said before, there are many ways of helping our neighbors. Too many people forget that one way of helping others is by an attitude of cheerfulness. Basically, it is selfishness, the opposite of fraternal charity, that makes many persons withdraw into a shell, present a dour face to those around them, go into long and sad silences, and rarely utter a kind or helpful word to someone else.

3. DEFECTS OF CHEERFULNESS

While cheerfulness or affability is a virtue that everybody should try to cultivate, it is also, like every other virtue, subject to excesses and defects which spoil the virtue. Consider some of these defects as they are commonly found in the characters of people.

1) *Lack of seriousness*, when it is time to be serious. It is not the virtue of cheerfulness to be incapable of giv-

ing serious attention to the important duties of life. It is a false and dangerous cheerfulness to make light of one's serious sins, to avoid all thoughts of judgment and hell, to say, as some people do when reminded of the consequences of their grave sins, "Oh well, if I'm going to hell, I know that I'll have plenty of company there." It is misguided cheerfulness that makes some people giddy and distracting to others and ready with jokes and jests in church or on other serious occasions. Extroverts, those of sanguinic temperament, lovers of gaiety and social life, must be especially on guard against this defect of cheerfulness.

2) *Lack of sympathy*. It is a great defect of cheerfulness for a person to be incapable of suffering with others and sympathizing with their sorrows. Those who have this defect will try to avoid people who have just suffered a great misfortune or bereavement,

or, if they do meet them, will manifest by their attitude that they are not going to permit themselves to be disturbed by the sorrows of others.

Actually, cheerfulness need not always be expressed by smiles and laughter and light-minded chatter. In the presence of sorrow and tragedy it adopts a serious mien and true signs of sharing in the sorrows of others. But at the same time it expresses itself in the solid motives for hope and fortitude and patience that God has provided for all whom He asks to suffer.

3) *Lack of realism.* Those who lack the ability to be sympathetic with others usually are wanting in a sense of realism well. They make light of the tears and grieving of others. They think up and propose exaggerated and fantastic reasons for not grieving. If a person is said by doctors to be

dying of cancer, they say that the doctors don't know what they are talking about. They refuse to permit any of their friends to face grim facts that are a cause of sorrow.

This has come to be called "Pollyanna cheerfulness," a phrase taken from a character created in fiction who was so sweetly cheerful about everything that ever happened that the effect is more gagging than inspirational.

4) *Lack of consistency.* There are some people who can be wonderfully cheerful at times, sometimes for certain periods of time, but who at other times and during other extended periods of time give way to unchecked sadness and melancholy. They do not possess the virtue of cheerfulness; rather they are ruled entirely by their feelings. Worse still is the habit into which some individuals have fallen,

of being cheerful in the presence of some of their relatives and friends, but sour and morose and gloomy in the presence of others.

This defect of cheerfulness is often to be found in the changing attitudes that people adopt toward their immediate families and those with whom they mingle outside their home. There are husbands, for example, who are celebrated for their cheerfulness at work, among their cronies, and even with chance acquaintances on the street, but who present to their wives and children nothing but an attitude of moroseness and silence and gloom. They are creatures of feeling, sometimes even neurotics, who have never learned to rise above their feelings.

It is true that control of the feelings is one of the most difficult of all human accomplishments. Even the

most solid and virtuous individuals will sometimes find that they cannot hide their feelings from others, much as they would like to. But the ideal should be recognized by all, and one's efforts to rise up to it should be obvious. The ideal is to be always the same toward others, and the same toward all others: kindly, affable, sympathetic, encouraging, in a word, cheerful. It must simply be taken for granted that feelings will often run contrary to such an external attitude, and that there is no hypocrisy in being ruled by the will rather than by the feelings.

5. *Lack of sobriety.* There is an unhealthy form of cheerfulness that some people practice only through dependence on dangerous stimulants of one kind or another. The most commonly used of such stimulants is alcohol. Everybody has met or heard of someone who can become cheerful, even

unpleasantly so, only when he is drinking. Drink is an escape from reality for such persons; without it they see nothing but reasons for sadness in their surroundings; with it they become boisterous, friendly, optimistic, and ultimately foolish and degraded.

Thus husbands who are never contented or cheerful at home will often turn out to be "the life of the party" in a favorite tavern, or with a group of friends over a round of drinks. This unhealthy and temporary cheerfulness is always a presage of tragedy to come.

4. HELPS TO CHEERFULNESS

Nothing in the way of aids to cheerfulness can substitute for the basic virtues described above as the essential reason for cheerfulness. Without strong hope and trust in God and expectation of heaven, without stalwart

fortitude built into one's character, and without an urgent sense of the obligation of fraternal charity. what seems to be cheerfulness in any person will actually turn out to be spoiled by many defects.

But there are helps at hand for the strengthening of these virtues and therefore of the habit of being cheerful. The first and most important is meditation and, what can be a form of meditation, spiritual reading. This simply means thinking or reading about God's goodness, about the love shown in the passion of Christ, about the promises God has made to all His followers, about noble examples of holiness in the lives of others, and thus being aroused to desire and pray for trust in God, fortitude in sorrow, the ability to sympathize with and encourage others.

Over and above these basic things, it is a great aid to cheerfulness to

analyze one's own temperament and to know what are its strengths and its weaknesses.

For example, if you find that you are predominantly sanguinic, that is, inclined to talkativeness, friendliness, gaiety and social life, you will find yourself lacking not so much cheerfulness but seriousness and sympathy, and may neglect duties to your family in order to satisfy your craving for the gaiety provided by taverns and pals.

Or, if you find by analysis that you are predominantly choleric, that is, tending to want to dominate others, to give orders, to be the leader in any work, to resent opposition, to anger easily, then you will find that you will *feel* cheerful only when you are in charge of things. When others are placed over you, or when they oppose you, you will find yourself feeling slighted and injured, and inclined to

give off sparks of resentment, anger, bitterness, sarcasm — the opposite of cheerfulness. It will take great will power and the help of God to make cheerfulness a habit even in the face of humiliation and opposition.

If you find yourself to be melancholic by temperament, you have the hardest task of all to acquire and practice cheerfulness. The melancholic temperament is inclined toward sadness, sensitiveness, aloofness. Persons given such a predominant temperament by God will rarely be able completely to hide it. At the same time they have an advantage in that prayer and meditation are easier for them than for others, and, if they use these means rightly, they will help them to discount nine-tenths of their leanings toward sadness and develop in them the virtue of cheerfulness.

If you must call yourself phlegmatic, without strong feelings of either

enthusiasm or depression, cheerfulness will not be difficult for you, but it can, if untrained, become self-centered and lacking in sympathy for others.

There is one final aid to cheerfulness that is practically indispensable. It is the cultivation of a sense of humor. This is not to be confused with the gift of being witty, of being able to tell humorous stories, of being able to make others laugh. One can have a sense of humor and not be a good joker or storyteller at all.

A sense of humor is the acquired ability to see contrasts and inconsistencies in life, especially in one's own life, and to be amused by them. Without a sense of humor, a person may be constantly sad over his lack of many material comforts and luxuries; with a sense of humor another person will see how foolish such sadness is

in the light of the truth that he has an immortal soul destined one day to enjoy the priceless riches of heaven. Thus a sense of humor keeps one from taking this passing world too seriously and inspires him to laugh at himself when he finds himself tempted to do so; it projects this same amusement over the inconsistencies in his own life into his conversation with others, so that they too are enabled at times to smile when they feel like weeping.

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