THE CROSS AND HAPPINESS

— Fr. Francis E. Fenton

All mankind seeks happiness. Nobody in his right mind wants to be unhappy. Because of original sin, however, and the distortion of human nature which followed upon it, so many seek happiness in the wrong places. So many think happiness is to be found in wealth, fame, fortune, luxury, sensuality, etc. Some of these aren't necessarily sinful but none of them give lasting happiness. Some of the richest people are very unhappy. Some of the most famous commit suicide. Misery, remorse, humiliation so often follow upon sins of the flesh.

Worldly objectives and pursuits can never bring lasting happiness. They never quite satisfy. The reality never quite measures up to the expectation. The fact of the matter is that nothing in this world, nothing created, be they persons, places or things, can give us that supreme happiness which we all so ardently seek for the very simple reason that they just don't have it to give. Saint Augustine expressed the idea as well as anyone in his famous words: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee". The capacity of the soul for happiness is infinite and nothing less than the infinite can adequately and permanently fill that capacity. God, Heaven, the Beatific Vision - these are the only answer, the only objective which can fully satisfy the yearnings of the human soul. So the Church has always taught. So human experience has proved since the fall of our first parents. Yet how comparatively few seem to learn that lesson well.

It is, then, literally impossible to be perfectly happy this side of eternity. But this does not mean that man is born to be miserable. While perfect happiness is found only in Heaven, yet we can attain at least a vague foretaste of it here on earth. We can be truly happy in this life to a degree, indeed, perhaps to a high degree. And where is that happiness to be found? In the answer to that question we have the great paradox, the great, though only apparent, contradiction of Christianity. Our true earthly happiness is found in the Cross of Christ, the extent of that happiness being in proportion to the spirit, the dispositions of soul, the good will with which we carry our cross in union with that of the Master.

Granting that God is the Source of all authentic happiness and that His possession by us is the only way that we can be perfectly happy, if anyone would even begin to approach the attainment of this ideal in this life, he must take up his cross and follow Christ, which is to say he must suffer with Christ. "If anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me."

But why the cross? Isn't there an easier way of going about all this? The plain answer is: NO. There is no other way to Heaven, no other way to happiness than the royal and painful and very unpopular way of the cross. Happiness consists in peace of soul, sanctifying grace, union with God, and to attain this we must wage unceasing warfare against sin and its proximate occasions. But to wage this warfare successfully means penance, self-denial, mortification, suffering. In this way comes purification of soul and so union with God. It has been said that no worthwhile life has ever been lived without sacrifice. This is indeed true and it is eminently true in the work of saving our souls, the accomplishment of which is the only really successful kind of life that means anything in the final analysis.

Of course, it's understood that it's not penance or suffering as such that has any supernatural value. The importance of all this lies in the motive, the intention, one's pure condition of soul, that is, being in the state of grace and offering up our thoughts and words and deeds, our Masses, Communions, Rosaries, our daily lives for the glory of God and for the salvation of our souls and those of our fellow men. "Whatever you do in word or in work, do all in the Name of the Lord Jesus." "Whether you eat or drink or do anything else, do all for the glory of God." The message of Fatima put the same thing another way, devotion to daily duty. In a word, whatever you do, do it as Christ would, were He in your place. Holiness consists not in doing extraordinary things but in doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way -and it is the motive, the intention which makes the ordinary extraordinary or supernatural.

Such, in brief, is the significance of the cross in our daily lives. Only through the Cross of Christ, lovingly borne, is true, authentic happiness to be found in this life, a happiness which, in turn, is a faint foretaste of the Beatific Vision, the ineffable, perfect, eternal happiness of the Kingdom of Heaven where, in the words of Holy Scripture, "eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man what things God has prepared for those who love Him".

