

Respect Life Sunday Talk

Happiness and Human Life

In the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 17, we read about Jesus healing the ten lepers. There was probably no worse illness that a person could suffer in Jesus' time than leprosy. The suffering was, in many ways, nearly unbearable. Jesus' love for us is clear in his desire to alleviate the suffering of the lepers, and God has built into our own hearts a natural desire to help others who are suffering. As Catholics, we are called to take on one another's burdens and to do what we can to relieve human suffering.

Probably the most common argument in favor of abortion is a desire to reduce human suffering. But many people don't have an adequate understanding of human suffering, and that's because our culture does a very poor job of leading us to true happiness.

Most of us don't spend a lot of time reflecting on what true happiness is. But we should, because the way a culture defines happiness will have everything to do with the way that culture defines the meaning of suffering.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle pointed out 2,400 years ago that there are actually different levels of happiness, and they are not all equal. If you could summarize the last 2,400 years of intellectual thought and dialogue on the subject, you can see four distinct kinds of human happiness.

Happiness Level 1 comes from physical pleasure and material possessions. It's an important kind of happiness. We need at least a basic level of physical sustenance in order to survive. But it's usually considered to be the lowest kind of happiness, because it's very short-lived – it's immediately gratifying, and then gone. It's not a very deep kind of happiness – it doesn't leave you feeling any deep sense of fulfillment. And it's not very pervasive – meaning that it doesn't affect very many people beyond yourself.

As Christians, we know that living for Happiness Level 1 as if it were the final objective of human existence rather than a means to a greater end, leads to a severe crisis of the soul – boredom, restlessness, feelings of living beneath ourselves, a sense that our lives have no real meaning.

Happiness 2 comes from an ego-gratification – the sense that our lives actually do have some value, although in this level, that sense of value, of worth, comes from how we compare to others. We can get ego-gratification from achieving a goal we set for ourselves, from being better than other people, from being powerful or in control over others, or from being admired or popular.

Again, there's nothing necessarily wrong with comparing ourselves to other people. But if we live for Level 2 as if it were our ultimate meaning in life – if that's how we begin to define ultimate happiness, we will end up in deep crisis. If my notion of self-worth is tied up in how I compare to others, I'm going to end up in a constant state of anxiety about people who are smarter, more talented, more powerful or more popular than I am.

Think about people you read about or know who have made Level 2 their guiding principle – putting themselves above everyone else for the sake of being more powerful, more admired, or more successful. You usually see a lot of aggression, anger, contempt for weaker and more vulnerable people, jealousy, rage, bitterness, suspicion of others, and even self-destructive behavior. Level 2 as an end in itself ends up being a living hell.

Happiness Level 3 is deeper than Level 2. It's longer lasting, and it uses more of our powers and gifts. It's the kind of happiness that comes from making a positive difference beyond myself for the good of someone else who is in need. It's the happiness that comes from sacrificing my own wants and needs in order to tend to the needs of another person. It can be experienced through charity, or through seeking what is true, or pursuing what is just over and above what will give me more pleasure or increase my own ego.

Most of us have feelings of nobility, honor, and deep peace when we do something good for others above the good of ourselves. And we feel guilty and troubled when we do the opposite. We instinctively know that sacrificing ourselves for the good of others is more worthy of us as human beings, then sacrificing another human being for our own good.

The fourth level of happiness comes from our desire for God. Human beings have a unique desire for absolute truth, unconditional love, perfect justice, and eternal home. We all yearn for the loving God who is the only one who can fulfill all of our deepest desires perfectly.

When someone argues that abortion is necessary in order to increase happiness and decrease suffering, it's important to ask the question, what do they mean by happiness? What do they mean by suffering?

If by happiness we only mean that we want to increase physical pleasure, possessions, and ego-gratification, we are completely missing the point of the Gospels. As the philosopher Thomas Hobbes once wrote, under that definition, life will become “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

But if by happiness we mean that we would like to help people achieve the fulfillment that comes from loving others and loving God – well that’s another matter altogether. If we believe that Happiness Levels 3 and 4 are not only better for us personally but also better for the culture, for society, and for communities, it completely changes the way we view success, quality of life, love, suffering, and freedom.

To someone who is stuck in Happiness Levels 1 and 2, material good and ego-fulfillment, **success** will be viewed as getting what I want when I want it, or having more than others. **Quality of life** will be seen as a mathematical ratio of how much pain and deprivation I am suffering to how much physical pleasure I can still enjoy. **Love** will be seen as giving me what I want and admiring me. **Suffering** in Level 1 or 2 will be completely unbearable unless I can somehow use that suffering to get ahead. And in the end, **freedom** will just be viewed as having all my choices open before me, regardless of the consequences to others, and without any legal or moral laws telling me not to.

Our culture is driving us, unreflectively, into this view of happiness. Abortion makes it much easier to seek this kind of happiness than to do what is truly worthy of us and give ourselves away in love for the good of others. It causes us to radically underlive our lives and miss out on far deeper interpretations of these words...

Such as the interpretation that the most **successful** people are those who have sacrificed everything in order to uphold what is true, good, loving, generous, compassionate, and just. Think of Jesus. Think of Saint Theresa of Calcutta. And then think of the difference between being successful at a career or an education at the expense of abandoning an unborn child through abortion, versus the success of selflessly choosing to protect a new life with which one has been entrusted – even if it means giving up on other plans and ambitions.

Or what about the Level 3 and 4 interpretation that the **quality of life** has far more to do with our capacity to love and to give generously than it has to do with how many things we have acquired or whether we have gained the esteem of others? Abortion can seem so attractive when someone is facing a reduced quality of life because of an unexpected pregnancy – until they change their view on what really gives life quality.

Or consider the Level 3 and 4 interpretation that **love** is being willing to do the good for the other above the good for myself. I often hear the argument that every child should

be a wanted child. But is it love to say that if you don't want your child, you should kill him? Would we say that if the child were 2 years old? Or 8? Or 16?

If a community of people is operating from a worldview where Happiness Levels 1 and 2 are their dominant focus, the pro-life message will not gain much traction. Because if their primary motivation is physical pleasure, material possessions, and ego gratification — if they define the meaning and dignity of life on their ability to achieve those things — then it will be difficult to convince those people of the moral urgency to protect the unborn child. The unborn child will simply be seen as a danger and a threat — something that undermines freedom, attacks autonomy, derails plans, threatens dreams, and lowers the quality of life.

But in a community of people that operates from a dominant Level 3 and Level 4 view of happiness, it's much easier to recognize that there's more at stake in the debate over abortion than simply "my rights" or "what's in it for me." We understand that the needs and rights of others in society — or what we sometimes call the common good — is crucially important, because we are made in the image and likeness a God who not only healed the lepers, but who also sent His only Son to die on a cross for all of us. We are all called to imitate that act of selfless surrender to the good of the other, and to help others do the same. Saint Paul writes to Timothy: "If we have died with him, we shall also live with him."

If you have downloaded the pew cards to place in all the pews, include the following text. Pew cards can be downloaded here:

www.healingtheculture.com/programs/respect-life-sunday/

In the pews, you will find a little card which you can return to receive free pro-life resources to help you teach others about the deeper meaning of happiness, love, and suffering. Please fill one out and place it in the baskets on your way out the door today, or take one home to fill out and return on your own.

The resources you will receive are just one way that you can work against the abortion mentality in our culture, and help share the message that it is in selfless love, that we will conquer suffering and find true happiness.

God bless you.

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