

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
The Key to Happiness

Sometimes I chuckle when modern science spends millions of dollars and years of research to prove something that Catholics have already known for centuries. One such case is the *Grant Study of Adult Development*, begun at Harvard in 1938 and carried forward to the present day. Researchers followed a group of Harvard men from their undergraduate days to the present to try and understand what accounts for human happiness and success. Lead researcher George Valliant summarizes the project thus: "The seventy-five years and twenty million dollars expended on the Grant Study points, at least to me, to a straightforward five-word conclusion: 'Happiness is love. Full stop.'" (George Valliant, *Triumphs of Experience: The Men of the Harvard Grant Study*, 52).

Researchers in the Harvard study determined that the ability to give and receive love, to form and retain intimate relationships, was the strongest factor in human flourishing. This should come as no surprise to Catholics, who have always held that love is the highest value, the one that makes us most like God. "Dear friends," says St. John, "let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." (1 John 4:7)

But Catholic faith offers something even more sublime than human love, something that no amount of research could ever reveal, something which promises a supernatural happiness. St. Paul speaks of a "love that surpasses knowledge," (Ephesians 3:19), and "the love of God, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit." (Romans 5:5) The Council of Trent teaches that once we know the love of Christ, that we are adopted as sons, we are able to love in return with a divine love. (*Sixth Session*)

Some people have a hard time relating to this love personally. They understand Christianity in the abstract: "Christ died to save humanity, of which I am a part." But they have much more difficulty believing it applies to *them*, "Christ loves *me*; Christ died *for me*." This is something that Pope John Paul II addressed directly. According to the Pope, bringing about this personal awareness of God's love is the fundamental task of the Church. To his mind, it was also the fundamental task of the Second Vatican Council. He wrote:

The Council teaches, "by his Incarnation, he, the Son of God, in a certain way united himself with each man." The Church therefore sees its fundamental task in enabling that union to be brought about and renewed continually. The Church wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life, with the power of the truth about man and the world that is contained in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption and with the power of the love that is radiated by that truth. (*Redemptor Hominis*, 8)

In Catholic faith, the single greatest instrument we have to communicate this personal awareness of Christ's love is the Eucharist. Pope John Paul II, again, reminds us: "In instituting it, he did not merely say: "This is my body", "this is my blood", but went on to add: "which is given for you." (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 12) For this reason, the Pope urges us to spend time in

Eucharistic adoration: "It is pleasant to spend time with him, to lie close to his breast like the Beloved Disciple and to feel the infinite love present in his heart." (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 25)

It is tempting to evaluate ourselves in terms of human performance - whether we win or lose, make good or bad grades, become rich or poor. But in our deepest relationships, with our own children, for example, we don't apply those standards. We love *because they are our children*. Part of our Catholic life is learning to believe that God is infinitely more merciful to us than we are towards ourselves, that He loves as a Father, and as a friend. (John 15:15)

I have known victims of abuse whose wounds were so deep that no human love could suffice. They did not think they would ever be capable of love. But, exposed to the love of Christ, through constant recourse to the sacraments, and especially to the Holy Eucharist, they learn to say with St. Josephine Bakhita, "I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good."