



Meditation 5

“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again”

Among everything that we usually perceive as duty, joy is seldom obvious. We feel joy more as a desire that sometimes happens, rather than as a duty that each day commits to us. But the worst thing that can happen to us is to invest in a fast-moving, highly productive life, which has lost the capacity of wonder, the possibility of delight, the occasion for laughter and celebration. We have to question ourselves if there is not a party deficit in our families.

The Russian writer Leon Tolstoy begins his celebrated novel *Anna Karenina* by saying that "All happy *families* look alike. Only *unhappy families* are unhappy in their own particular way." That is not quite true. If the way of unhappiness is very personal, so is the way of celebrating and building joy together. Jesus tells us in St. John's Gospel: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete". (John 15:11) and later "no one will take away your joy" (John 16:22). There is, therefore, a joy that constitutes the long-term vision for our life. It is essential that family members feel that it is for joy that they are being called. Joy for the chosen group. In fact, we are transported, led and carried by the hand of a promise, and that promise is joy.

Joy cannot be reduced to a form of well-being or emotional comfort, despite having also that meaning. Joy is, fundamentally, a profound expression of being: in kindness, in truth, in beauty. Joy does not come to us when we pause in our lives: joy is born when we take one of life's threads, no matter which, and we manage to creatively bring it to its culmination.

Instead of increasing in strictness, intransigence, indifference, sarcasm, slander, lamentation, let us walk hopefully in the opposite direction. Let us grow in simplicity, gratitude, detachment and trust. Blessed are the families who say of themselves: "we are a laboratory for joy "; "We are a school of the smile"; "We are an workshop for hope"; "We are a factory for the hug and the party".

Let us return to the parable of the prodigal son. The father tells the reticent eldest son about the welcome party he has prepared for the youngest: "But we had to have a party and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and came back to life, was lost and is found" (Lk 15: 32). "We had to have a party..."

They did not have to celebrate at all. But mercy makes us discover another duty: "We had to have a party." This is mercy. A duty to which no one forces us,



but which is an obligation born from the depths of hope, from the desire to relaunch life, from the wish to affirm that life is the most precious gift.

It happens sometimes that as children grow up, the box of toys disappears from families. Houses become (a little) tidier, have a perfect routine that they have not had for years, recovering a normal respectability. Then there is a peace, a time without the usual infuriating surprises: games scattered everywhere, dolls resurfacing where they absolutely should not, and so on. First you breathe a sigh of relief. But then, strangely we don't feel it's so good. For there is a time when we realize how much we lack the box of toys.

It is in this box that we find the symbols, the jokes, the laughter, the family holidays, the anniversaries, the endless games around the table with the old and the young with the same enthusiasm, the caring contemplation without any special reason. In this box we can find the crazy and wise stories we tell throughout our lives. There we keep the smells, the memories, the words of a song that we sang many times and then forgot, the first bicycle, the books we had before we could read, the cards we played, the silence of intimacy, the trip to the village, the long talks at the window looking out at the night. In this box we can find the art of making time, or of losing it, so that it becomes ours, allowing the imagination to feel a sense of fun and joy. The box of toys has no purpose, and so it gives us reasons to live.

I remember a story that a friend told me. Her father was a judge. A demanding man, with no time to waste, no great desire to listen to the details that worried the children. She grew up, graduated, and for the first few years went to work as her father's secretary. This closeness did nothing to change the picture she knew: they were two strangers, with a formal relationship, and a world full of things to be said. But one day they took a business trip to one of the Greek islands. They went by boat, and we can imagine the long hours spent on the voyage. However, one day at dawn, she realized with a start that her father was in her cabin, waking her up. She looked at him without understanding what was going on. And he said to her, "Come and see the sun rising. It's huge, huge. Hurry up. You'll like it. Come". Many years later, after her father had died, my friend confided to me: "If he had done at least one more thing like this, just one more, I would have forgiven him everything."

Let us pray for our families so that they become communities of encounter, forgiveness and party.