

Pope Francis & His Secrets to Happiness

In an interview published in an Argentine weekly on July 27, the pope listed his Top 10 Tips for bringing greater joy to one's life. Let's look at a few of these that we can apply to our own lives. I will contrast the Pope's advice to the urgings of our culture. The first four apply to how we act towards others:

1. "The Romans have a saying, which can be taken as a point of reference, they say: live and let live," said Pope Francis. "That's the first step to peace and happiness."

Some have taken this to mean that any lifestyle is just as good as any other. That is not what he is saying. He is thinking internationally and recognizing that other cultures look at things differently than Catholics and he is suggesting that we respect those who think differently than we do. The flipside is that other cultures should respect our beliefs and practices. This is one way of addressing the worldwide persecution of Christians. The Pope suggests that this is "the first step to peace and happiness."

2. "Be giving of yourself to others. People need to be open and generous toward others, he said, "because, if one gets tired, and you withdraw into yourself, you run the risk of becoming egocentric."

Our culture is based on a rigorous individualism; advertising and marketing encourage us to satisfy our own needs - needs we don't even know we have without their prompting.

The Pope's statement is consistent with the social dimension of the Church's ministry which has always been a major emphasis of the Church in imitation of Jesus.

3. We should stop being negative. "Needing to talk badly about others indicates low self-esteem. That means, 'I feel so low that instead of picking myself up I have to cut others down,'" the pope said. "Letting go of negative things quickly is healthy."

Our competitive culture often makes us feel that we should be critical of the opinions and efforts of others. In the prayer of St. Francis we read, "grant that I may not so much seek: to be understood as to understand." Seeking to understand others as a first step, rather than to criticize them, is the positive alternative.

4. Don't proselytize; respect others' beliefs. "We can inspire others through witness so that one grows together in communicating. But the worst thing of all is religious proselytism, which paralyzes: 'I am talking with you in order to persuade you,' No. Each person dialogues, starting with his and her own identity. The church grows by attraction, not proselytizing," the pope said.

The Pope is not suggesting that we give up evangelization. He is suggesting that the most effective way to do this is by the example of how we live our lives not telling others how they should live their lives. This reminds us of the saying attributed to St. Francis, "Preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words."

The last two I will mention apply to our personal and family life:

5. 'Proceed calmly' [or "move quietly"] in life. The pope, who used to teach high school literature, used an image from an Argentine novel in which the main character looks back on how he lived his life:

"He says that in his youth he was a stream full of rocks that he carried with him; as an adult, a rushing river; and in old age, he was still moving, but slowly, like a pool of water," the pope said. The Pope likes the image of a pool of water — it suggests "the ability to move with kindness and humility, a calmness in life."

Our culture is the opposite of calm, it is frenetic.

6. This naturally takes us to enjoying "a healthy sense of leisure. The pleasures of art, literature and playing together with children have been lost," he said.

"Consumerism has brought us anxiety and stress, causing people to lose that healthy culture of leisure," he said. Their time is 'swallowed up' so people can't share it with anyone.

"Even though many parents work long hours, they must set aside time to play with their children; work schedules make it complicated, but you must do it," he said.

"Families must also turn off the TV when they sit down to eat because, even though television is useful for keeping up with the news, having it on during mealtime doesn't let you communicate with each other," the pope said.

Sundays are a part of this leisure and should be treated as a holiday or day of rest. Sundays should be family time.

Our culture ties us up with activities that cause stress. The Pope suggests replacing these with true leisure.

All in all, the Pope's message is quite countercultural. But so is our faith and so is Jesus.

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