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The subjectivity of happiness: on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's 'Flow'

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The pursuit of happiness, one of the most popular subjects of contemporary spiritual writing, is also among the most superficially addressed themes in the church's homiletics. From Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) to Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006), seekers of the last 60 years have demonstrated an unquenchable interest in the power of spiritual technologies to better their well-being or cure anxieties and depression.

These popular approaches, with their insistence on the ability of individuals to affect their material conditions entirely independent of God, are decisively anti-Christian. All the more reason, then, for the church to offer a strong alternative.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* is a secular text that breaks the "positive thinking" mold. To create happiness, Csikszentmihalyi insists, it is not the world that must change, but our habits and actions. The happiest individuals are constantly engaged with the world, doing activities that match a high level of difficulty with a high degree of skill. The key to happiness, therefore, is to find more of these flow activities and do them more often.

Nearly anything, it seems, can serve as a flow activity. The diversity of potentially fulfilling activities directly confronts a culture so often interested in success that can be quantified in financial and personal terms. While flow activities share several common characteristics, Csikszentmihalyi argues, finding the right activity requires a uniquely personal process of exploration and self-discovery. No matter what they are -- physical exertion, study, artistic expression or spirituality -- flow activities reveal themselves in the way they push the self towards complexity and growth.

Csikszentmihalyi believes so strongly in the power of challenge to affect happiness that he argues such an approach is available to anyone -- even amid the most dramatic suffering known to mankind. The psychologist gives brief but significant attention to the accounts of those who thrive under adversity, including Victor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist who described the techniques he discovered as a victim of the Holocaust in *Man's Search for Meaning*.

The unprecedented stress of internment camp life Frankl describes affected each prisoner in different ways. Still, each experienced what Frankl calls more intense inner life -- a stronger sense of the beauty of art and nature, a deeper love for family left behind and even a sense of humor. Amid starvation, exhaustion and fear, the individual perspectives that make the self can endure and even thrive.

"Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths," he writes.

Immense suffering is not required for the soul to be "torn open." We need not fight for our soul, which comes from God; we need fight only to keep from losing it.

"The 'battle,'" Csikszentmihalyi writes, "is not really against the self, but against the entropy that brings disorder

to consciousness. It is really a battle for the self; it is a struggle for establishing control over attention."

The Secret's failing, ultimately, is in its objectivity. By focusing on visualizing and manifesting desires, Byrne encourages an attitude in which other people, culture, history and even the self are means to different ends. Our faith teaches that such God-imitating behavior is not only heresy, it's ultimately untenable. By his incarnation, Jesus Christ presents to us the idea that human nature is unmistakably good. Faithful happiness, then, comes from harmonizing that nature with its divinely created vocation, the purpose inscribed in each of our hearts.

Csikszentmihalyi is skeptical that traditional religious systems, particularly Christianity, can provide meaning to the next century's children, trapped in existential dread. He might well be correct to assume Christian preaching is quickly consigning itself to irrelevancy on the issue of happiness. An undeveloped faith will not by itself create happiness, nor will liberation from sin. Beyond preaching on moral action, the church bears a special responsibility to project its positive view of human beings and the unique vocation given each individual person.

No matter the strength of our devotion, our repentance or our "positive thinking," our reality will still reflect a will we cannot understand. Bad things will still happen to good people.

"The most promising faith for the future," Csikszentmihalyi writes, "might be based on the realization that the entire universe is a system related by common laws and that it makes no sense to impose our dreams and desires on nature without taking them into account."

Recognition of that reality -- the presence of a supernatural power that has brought us into existence and our incredible powerlessness in the face of that power -- is the first step on the road toward grasping for meaning in our lives. A relevant, compassionate church ought to also guide the faithful toward the second step: ensuring all work and play, rich and poor, simple and complex constitutes participation in what the U.S. bishops called "God's creative activity."

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