

# Is Joy to be Taken for Granted?

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## Is Joy to be Taken for Granted? A Reflection during Advent

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by the Rev. Dr. Marta Illueca

Recently, during worship for the start of the Advent season, I felt imbued by a plethora of images that triggered this present reflection. In Advent, we join Christians from all over the world and through the centuries, in their sense of anticipation for the coming of Christ. And so, we do await as well, and we cling to that hope and expectation for joy beyond description. That joy, however, seems like a utopia in a world clouded by chaotic confusion, violence, and societal aloofness. My advent reflection starts with words from our Savior, in his farewell discourse for his beloved disciples:

*“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”* Jn. 15:11

It's almost as if Jesus, in his wisdom, hints at the premise that joy *per se* is not the complete human experience. If the capacity for joy is inherent to human nature, the reality is that this is not necessarily a trait that is permanent or always functional. As Christians, we believe it is our god given birthright to embrace our innate capacity to love, praise, and rejoice in the surrounding gifts of creation and the promise of Christ's return. But these ideas clash with the fragile framework of our humanity and the current state of global distress that surrounds our society.

The glory of Christ, the joy sung by the angels at his birth and the promise of his second coming sometimes seem like the mirage of a spiritual oasis that we long for, in the middle of the desert of our human existence. Inherent in our humanity is the capacity to express emotions, including joy. But we are not immune to the world's violence and aggression. Our nation is chronically participating in war-related conflict, and we do not have the power to protect our brethren, their families, and others that get caught in the middle of armed conflicts.

We are living in troubled times, colored by unprecedented levels of discrimination and violence. And, I cannot help but seek a more balanced equation thinking of all the emotional collateral damage from the trepidation of current times. On one hand, our default sense of compassion naturally flows to the victims upon whom befalls the rising and widespread cruelty in our own nation. In contrast, let us not forget the question of how that level of violence and socio-cultural intolerance affects both perpetrators and witnesses. A

consequence of inflicting suffering upon others, wittingly or unwittingly, is the poorly understood and recently characterized scourge that affects a significant group in our society, and that is what modern psychology refers to as “moral injury”. The latter results from a conflict between an individual’s moral compass and their actions or the actions they witness.

Moral injury is an emergent concept, described as a syndrome which robs its victims from the ability to make meaning and the capacity for joy. In the words of a former war veteran:

*“There is much to be learned about moral injury... But there is one thing I am certain about, it is that in committing great wrongs against others, I committed great wrongs against myself as well.”* (from Brock & Lettini’s *“Soul repair: Recovering from moral injury after war,”* 2012)

At the heart of moral injury is the loss of moral agency, and in the process there is the loss of meaning in life. As new knowledge emerges regarding the recognition and management of moral injury as originally described in war veterans and later in other scenarios, the need for specialized pastoral interventions has greatly increased and it is becoming an important complement in the treatment of conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

### **So how can we reconcile our society’s existential turmoil with our Christian hope for complete joy?**

As Christians, we rely in the revealed word of God and the moral teachings of Jesus who promised us hope for complete joy:

*“Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”* (Jn. 16:24)

As humans, we hang on to the hope of a bright future, where peace and Christian fellowship prevails and where wars become a thing of the past. If moral injury proves to be what researchers are reporting to us, then we have in our hands a reality that is deeply disturbing. Somewhere in my city, in your neighborhood, in many corners of this nation, many are struggling with a unique kind of suffering colored by their loss of meaning-making and craving for our empathy and support.

And for those of us who must watch from a distance, there remains the question of: how do we find hope in the belief that God’s goodness, as originally portrayed in creation, will prevail? When God created the world and humanity, he “saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). We could say that God rejoiced in his creation and we, as the *imago dei* are the living organs of the divine creative will.

After the fall of Adam and Eve, pain and suffering, crime and punishment entered a world originally created out of love, “when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (Job 38:4,7). In our heart, we believe in a loving God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). And through Jesus Christ, we find hope in

eternal life. As children of God, we strive for a way of life that follows a dutiful code of conduct and that looks ahead with hope for the day when God “will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” (Rev. 21:4).

Jesus teaches us how to make our joy wholesome, by abiding in his love and following his commands, which center around the love of neighbor as self. When we follow the Christian way of life, we can rejoice in the goodness of creation and express compassion and empathy toward the less fortunate human beings whose capacity for joy is thwarted by life traumas. Pain and suffering are a reality of this life, yet God’s love and goodness are infinite and wholesome. I believe that the answer to finding hope and to fully rejoice in the goodness of creation can also be found deep in the life and teachings of Jesus.

It is my hope that more research and academic inquiry is done into the nature of joy and happiness, and that new approaches to the study of the human psyche will contribute to craft a hopeful and ethically sound future for our younger generations.