



Pastor's Pen

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- Fr. Tom Wilson, Pastor

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The enshrinement of “the pursuit of happiness” in our nation’s founding documents provides a building block for the universal human desire to be happy. That desire for Happiness is part of who we are as human beings, and that yearning in our heart is the key element of our seeking the truth, beauty, and goodness of God, the true and authentic source of human happiness in this life and the next. We are not robotic in our pursuit or perception of happiness, so it will look different for different people. That is not to say that all choices made in the name of the search for happiness will make a person happy, nor is it an affirmation that anyone declaring herself “happy” is really happy. There’s evidence galore of people making choices that end up making themselves anything *but* happy, and the announcement of “being happy” doesn’t make it so.

Within the nuances of the perceptions of what happiness is and how we pursue it, lie a few nearly universally accepted principles of what makes people happy that do not require faith or belief in religiously revealed truth. One of those is the need for community. As much as we champion the idea of freedom (with all of its common misinterpretations), very few people would suggest that using that freedom to isolate themselves from others would lead to any commonly accepted idea of human flourishing. We need other people to be happy. We need community. We need to interact in ways that go beyond just the transactional.

Meeting that common understanding of the need for others to be happy begins in our own families. Yes, we can all make lists, some quite lengthy, of the flaws in our families and even tragically the wounds we may experience in them. But despite failings in families, it is within that framework that we experience, along with the potential sorrows of human interaction, the joys of communal life that make happiness possible.

Two statistics I recently came across suggest a trend away from “the pursuit of happiness” in the western world that diminishes the role of marriage, family and community in attaining happiness. Married people are now a minority of adults in the United States. The birthrate in the U.S. has fallen to 1.7 as of the end of 2017, far below a replacement rate of 2.1. Fewer people are taking the route of marriage and family in their pursuit of happiness, and that will have deep effects on our future. The economic realities are obvious (not enough younger people to care for the older, and not enough people to keep economies growing). But the broader cultural effects are even greater as the number of “unattached” adults grows.

In a recent article by Auguste Meyrat, he suggests, “Because people often resist the suggestion that they have any responsibility to give back to society by having children, and many will be dead or close to dead by the time (demographic) effects have become disastrous, many people take little interest in the demographic crisis.” It’s hard to argue against the dangers of the population winter we are headed for, but the cultural effects of so many people not being formed by their relationship to family and community will have harmful effects on both individuals and our communities that go well beyond the obvious economic challenges.

Meyrat asserts that societies with “too many childless (by choice) adults” result in dissipated communities and “people become disconnected from one another, their immediate surroundings, and even themselves.” It strikes me as a logical conclusion. The longer a person is disconnected from community (particularly by conscious choice), treats the community as a means to his or her own end, or if one never learns to interact with it any meaningful way, the more likely the community is to break down and the less happy people will be.

The link to community that leads to human flourishing begins in families. If there are no children that provide the living, breathing invitation to self-giving within that fundamental unit of all societies, communities beyond families will also decline in both numbers and as instruments of happiness for people.