



What makes you happy?

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

When Thomas Jefferson and co-committee members drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776, they drew on the writings of previous authors who had listed "life, liberty and property" or "life, liberty and security". Just what did they mean by "the pursuit of happiness" and why did they think it more important than property?

"What makes you happy?" I asked several people in both Minnesota and Venezuela. I realize that the resulting responses may be a bit skewed, since those I surveyed were all people of faith responding to a question by a priest, but not one of them mentioned property, material possessions or money in the list of what makes them happy. Furthermore, despite the social and economic differences between Venezuela and Minnesota, the lists of what makes people happy turn out to be pretty similar. Consider the following:



MN: being at peace with God and with family.
VEN: the love of God and the health of my family.

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MN: an armful of grand babies! I can spend any amount of time just watching them play.

VEN: having my daughters healthy and happy together with me.

MN: being around people and helping others...also a good glass of wine while listening to live music.

VEN: seeing the progress of people in life and knowing that I am doing something good for others.

MN: when I see children and young adults at Mass, especially if it's an "extra" like a daily Mass.

VEN: that in this time we are learning to value what is most important...the love of God and the unity of our family, things we maybe didn't take time to focus on before, busying ourselves with so many things.

MN: When I was teaching, one of my greatest joys was talking with kids about books and the love of reading. Today, I continue to share that love of reading with friends and family.

VEN: spending time with family and friends, planning a little trip with them, or enjoying that magic moment opening a book for the first time without really knowing what is hidden in its pages.

MN: pretty much everything can make me happy...all kinds of weather, people and God's creation

VEN: oneness with the earth, joy in simple things.

Going for a walk with friends, working in the garden, a hug from a friend at the moment you most need it, family get-togethers, a quiet time of prayer experiencing closeness and peace with God. Not a single thing on the lists I received, except maybe that glass of wine, cost a cent. Is it true, then, as the expression goes, that "money can't buy you happiness?" Maybe, but consider this for a moment. People who don't have money tend to be more stressed and worry a lot more than those who do. Their life is less comfortable. Such is the reality for our parishioners here in Venezuela, yet they are as happy, if not more so, than folks back in Minnesota.

Money does make life more comfortable. You can buy cool stuff and have lots of experiences. But here's the problem. People who seek happiness by accumulating things and experiences tend to be far less happy than those who do not. Happiness seems to elude them. In fact, it eludes anyone who pursues happiness itself as their goal. For a good example, check out the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10. As a teacher here put it so well, "We spend our lives seeking happiness without really knowing what it is that truly makes us happy."

True happiness only comes as a by-product, an indirect result, of seeking strong loving relationships with God and others, fulfilling jobs and past-times that put our talents and interests into action, and making a positive difference helping others. Such is the reality reflected in the lists I received. True happiness comes more from focusing on others than focusing on oneself, as one lady here put it: "Seeing my family happy is what makes me happy." Such is the "pursuit of happiness" that can bear positive results for people everywhere.

Points to ponder

What makes you happy? How can you help other people to experience more happiness in their lives?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.