

Last Fall at our annual priest workshop at Pokagon, the Bishop had arranged a speaker for us to teach us about “The Four Levels of Happiness.” In a nutshell, we were created for happiness. We long for happiness. God wants us to be happy, and in human experience, there are four levels of happiness.

Level 1

Happiness derived from material objects and the pleasures they can provide. This is the most basic level of happiness, and it can come from eating fine chocolate, driving a sports car, a cool swim on a hot day, or other forms of physical gratification. Level 1 happiness is good but limited. The pleasure it provides is immediate but short-lived and intermittent. It is also shallow; it requires no reflection, and it doesn’t extend beyond the self in any meaningful way.

Level 2

Happiness derived from personal achievement and ego gratification. You feel Level 2 happiness when people praise you; when they acknowledge your popularity and authority; when you win in sports or advance in your career. Level 2 happiness is usually comparative because the ego measures success in terms of advantage over others. You’re happy when you’re seen as smarter, more attractive, or more important than others, and you’re unhappy when you lose the comparison game. Level 2 happiness is short-term and tenuous. You can be happy that you won today, and then anxious you might lose tomorrow. Level 2 is not inherently bad because we all need success, self-esteem, and respect to accomplish good things in life. But when Level 2 happiness – self-promotion – becomes your only goal, it leads to self-absorption, jealousy, fear of failure, contempt, isolation, and cynicism.

Level 3

Happiness derived from doing good for others and making the world a better place. Level 3 happiness is more enduring because it is directed toward the human desire for love, truth, goodness, beauty, and unity. It is capable of inspiring great achievements because it unites people in pursuit of the common good, whereas Level 2 happiness divides people. Level 3 is empathetic, not self-absorbed, and it looks for the good in others, not their flaws. It sees life as an opportunity and an adventure, not an endless series of problems to overcome. Because people have limits, Level 3 happiness also has its limits. None of us are perfect, so we can’t find perfect fulfillment in other people.

Level 4

Ultimate, perfect happiness. When others fall short of our ideals, or we fall short ourselves, we’re disappointed. This disappointment points to a universal human longing for transcendence and perfection. We don’t merely desire love, truth, goodness, beauty, and unity; we want all of these things in their ultimate, perfect, never-ending form. All people have this desire for ultimacy, which psychologists call a desire for transcendence – a sense of connection to the larger universe. Some express this desire through spirituality and religious faith. Others express the same longing through philosophy, through art, or through scientific efforts to solve the mysteries of life and the universe.

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Now, we live our lives with an intermingling of these various levels of happiness. Ok, so far, no problem. We want to be happy. God wants us to be happy, so go for it!

Here's the problem. Because of original sin and our own selfishness, we can get fixated on a level, trying to get ultimate happiness out of things that don't offer ultimate happiness. Also, while we seek happiness within these levels, many times we do it in a way that goes against God's law, and this is of course sin.

This is an interesting way to look at sin, by the way. Really, when we sin, we are looking for happiness, just in the wrong way, a way that actually won't make us really happy and also hurts others, ourselves, and our relationship with God.

So let's go back to level 1 happiness. So, for example, there is nothing wrong with the pleasure we get from a good meal or a good drink, but we have the capacity to make that pleasure something we live for. Is this not what Satan tempted Jesus with? "You're hungry, Jesus. Abandon what God is asking of you. Turn the stones into Bread."

Let's go to Level 2. There is nothing wrong with personal achievement, using our gifts. It's gratifying to do a good job. It's even ok at times to want power. Someone has to be the mayor. Someone has to be the governor. Someone has to be the President. But obviously, we can see how the search for happiness on this level can become distorted:

We boast so people will think more of us.

We lie so that we can maintain power.

We criticize and tear down in a futile attempt to build ourselves up.

Again, Satan's voice, "Worship me. Turn your back on what is good and true. I will lift you up. I will give you power." I think you get the point.

We enter this Lenten Season, and God desires to purify our search for happiness. God wants us to be happy and our turning away from sin is not a turning away from happiness. Sometimes I think we think that if we give up a certain sin, we won't be happy, but it's just the opposite, and this Lenten purification begins with putting our relationship with God first above all things. As our relationship with God deepens, we discover where ultimate happiness lies, and then all the other levels of happiness that we seek out in our lives find their proper place.

My friends, during this Lenten Season we open ourselves through prayer, fasting, almsgiving to the purifying action of God who desires us to find in Him, not sorrow, but ultimate happiness.

Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the 1st Sunday of Lent, 2016.