



## The Navigator of History The Importance of Optimism in a Hostile World

In these trying times it is increasingly difficult even for people of faith to be optimistic. The persistence of world terrorism, the turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa, the financial uncertainty of Europe and Wall Street have all combined to send repeated shock waves of anxiety, depression, nervousness and even a cold-blooded *Angst* through the rafters of Western Civilization.

### The Best of All Worlds

Amid so much negativity and dour consequence, it is the stuff of heroic virtue for religious people to put on an optimistic face. The Christian optimist is one who maintains that the world is on the whole good and beautiful, and that man can aspire to a state of true happiness and perfection in this world or in the next. This term became current in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to designate the *Leibnizian doctrine*, ascribed to 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Gottfried Leibniz that *this is the best of all possible worlds*.

As an emotional disposition *optimism* is the tendency to look upon the bright and hopeful side of life, while its mirror opposite, pessimism, closes the curtain on any ray of hope in any difficult situation. History is replete with philosophical optimists such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, St. Augustine, St. Thomas and the Scholastics.

It is important to note the Lord God in heaven is the wellspring of all optimism. As it is written, *I am with you always to the close of the age* and with him *all things are possible*. The Old Testament has a very optimistic aura. In the Book of Genesis (1:31) *And God saw all things that he had made, and they were very good*. While there is some disagreement among Biblical scholars, the New Testament is generally optimistic because it shows that the sufferings of this life pale by comparison with the glory that awaits all who die in Christ.

Christian optimism also has deep roots in the *Communion of Saints*. Catholic saints are good examples for people of all faiths. Their lives are prime examples that God loves all people and will forgive anyone who comes to Him. Their lives were stunning examples of self-sacrifice, prayer and penitential

suffering. The Communion of Saints serves as the constant fuel for Christian optimism because the faithful can always count on the mysterious but very real help of those who have proven their eternal love for Jesus Christ.

### Faith Based Optimism

Christian optimism is a result of faith, not of circumstances. The Christian realizes that God always has man's best interests in mind. God works good, even from a personal tragedy or an abject evil. An optimistic Christian is seasoned in his ability to find the silver lining of spiritual and emotional comfort. The Christian optimist sees the realities of life, both good and bad, through the eyes of Jesus and His promise of eternal life.

However this is not the optimism of the *happy egoist* who seeks only his personal tranquility by closing his eyes to reality while chanting insincere bromides, such as *everything will work out in the end*. It is the optimism of one who follows Christ closely but will not delude himself as to the nature of his reality.

The optimistic Christian trusts that God will never desert him. He is confident that his good works and faith will not go unnoticed or unrewarded in Heaven. To maintain the true spirit of optimism, Christians must eschew all negative and sinful thoughts from their thinking. The focus should be on the good things in life, instead of dwelling on the unpleasant, difficult and mundane affairs of their lives. They should face each day with a prayer, a smile and a peaceful outlook that reflects the life of Christ within them.

### A Divine Paradox

The more one studies the life of Jesus the greater His unyielding spirit of optimism radiates. Optimism dominated his ministry. Jesus constantly corrected His disciples' understandable tendency toward despondency and gloom.. Perhaps no word was found on the lips of our Lord more than that of *be of good cheer*. Yet His followers often referred to Him as both the *Lord of Sorrows* and the *Lord of Hope*. This paradox reveals His latent human fear of the historic destiny that awaited Him.

Jesus' more dominant sanguinity was not the easy optimism that lives in the modern world of utopian illusions. Jesus knew only too well that His creations were not all pure and good. He would not let them blame every failure or crime on society. His disciples sometimes fell into a pit of pride that was tinted with their human attraction toward evil. To counter this, He promised that they would not move through life like rudderless ships, but as men who understood the natural forces at work around them. Jesus never promised a speedy or easy victory, even though His disciples thought His *Second Coming* was imminent. His promises required a patient optimism that was fostered in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Christ left his Church to his disciples and their successors, in order to foster a fundamental spirit of optimism that was designed to be the characteristic of the citizens of this new kingdom.

### The Ocean of History

Christ commissioned His church to both lead and understand His role as *the Lord of History*. This was perfectly illustrated in Anne Carroll's classic history, *Christ The King — Lord of History*. She clearly illustrated that Christ is the central figure in all of history. She vividly portrayed the Church's role, which was to underscore the inherent optimism in His Incarnation and Resurrection, so as to reconcile the world to Himself. Even our calendars are based on the birth and death of Jesus Christ... B.C. and A.D.

Christ's life was the embodiment of a new philosophy of history that would serve future millennia or what C. S. Lewis called the *Tao* of salvation. The road to salvation has not been without its pitfalls. Throughout history, the Church has been plagued by religious wars, persecutions and internal corruptions. To counter these setbacks, the Church has had to keep its eyes upwards like the Gothic cathedrals that dotted the major cities of Christendom in the Middle Ages, providing unity and a visible course for its members to follow.

However this course would not always be a route in pacific waters. The Church has seriously deviated from its Divine mandate. The ocean of history has been saturated with tidal waves of decay, war, famine, chaos, and periodic purgation. Christians would have had to keep steady the course through a constant haze of volatility and uncertainty. Looking upward to *the navigator of history* would prove to be the only way that they could safely follow His course. Every storm they encountered evoked the magnificent optimism of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah who wrote *the waves of the sea rage horribly, yet can they not prevail*. (5:21)

### Christians with Dour Faces

It is a painful reality that many of the faithful walk around with dour looks on their faces. Many often act surly, uncharitable and overly pious. One can only surmise that they have some painful physical condition or are wearing a hair shirt, and sackcloth and ashes as a penitential rite. To them life is mere *basket weaving* and the sooner it is over the quicker

they could be with God. This attitude is an insult to their Heavenly Father who made them to be beacons of light to the rest of the world, not to hide their talents in dark and dusty rooms.

These self-centered Christians have deafened their ears to the *good news* of the Gospels. They pride themselves on earning their own salvation, instead of throwing themselves completely on God's mercy. In doing so they have failed dismally to display that sense of joy that should excite and energize their faith and devotion. Unfortunately this attitude has survived well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Joy and Scolding

Christian optimism works wonders in avoiding the malice of sin, lightening human suffering and moderating our pleasures. It is axiomatic that only in Christianity can the human heart find satisfaction and peace on earth.

There is an important caveat with Christian optimism. One must never confuse it with an unrealistic attitude fostered by a liberal utopia. As an outgrowth of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Americans adopted what historians call *a religion of the heart*. This was a faith that was based primarily on good feelings and unrealistic earthly expectations. This hollow religious spirit was the precursor of the modern secular faith of today.

As Josemaria Escriva, the founder of the Opus Dei Movement wrote, *Christian optimism is not a sugary optimism, nor is it a mere human confidence that everything will turn out all right. It is the positive attitude that leads us to make demands on ourselves, to struggle to respond at every moment to God's call*. St. Paul was just such an optimist. In his *Letter to the Philippians* he stressed that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ is obligated to be an optimist. Christians must *rejoice in the Lord always*... and just in case you didn't hear, he says it again, *and again I say 'rejoice'*.

Likewise the Christian must also ward against letting his optimism turn into pessimism. It is sinful for a Christian to be constantly griping, complaining and grumbling and finding a dark cloud behind every silver lining. One could easily become a pessimist and not be totally aware of how deeply negative he has become about life. So it is possible to think negatively so often that one does not even realize one is being a pessimist.

Paul was the first in a long line of writers who wrote Christian literature in prison and influenced the church to be optimistic and hopeful in spite of problems. St. Paul could easily have become a pessimist or even a manic-depressive. He did not write his *letter of joy* from his yacht in the Mediterranean, but from a dungeon. He was there unjustly for serving his Lord and blessing people with the *good news* of the Gospel.

## A Revised 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment

To many Americans sporting events are a mere diversion from their daily existence. Sometimes sports transcend the quotidian reality of mundane living. The religious battle that surrounds Tim Tebow, the much-maligned quarterback of the National Football League's Denver Broncos, is such a case.

There is something inherently special about athletes *whose own faith is so central to their success*. Though Tebow readily admits he *doesn't believe God plays a hand in the streak of wins, his faith arguably does*. Even his own teammates who may not share his religious beliefs benefit from his faithful confidence and pure humility in the face of the violent nature of their team sport.

According to Elizabeth Scalia, the Managing Editor of the *Catholic Portal at Patheos*, the media *feeding frenzy* surrounding Tebow who is arguably a prime example of the wholesome, clean-cut all-American man, *says a great deal about the depths to which America's values have fallen*. His frequent public genuflections particularly rankle his detractors. In a country that cherishes its individual freedoms, many feel threatened by Tebow's public display of faith and his professed chastity. In a league with blithe and unrepentant felons, the frequency and the depth of the personal attacks points to something deeper.

Many interpret secular society's treatment of this football player as another example of the left attempting to strike public displays of faith from the market place. They see this as consistent with the Obama government's attack on the conscience rights of Catholic medical personnel and all Catholic institutions that will be required to insure their employees for contraceptives, abortifacients pills and sterilization. This sentiment evokes the words of C.S. Lewis who noted *the modern world insists that religion be a purely private affair, then shrinks the area of privacy to the vanishing point*. Freedom of religion, under secular authority, has been revised to read—*freedom from religion*. This has become the new 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment.

Liberal America has not forgiven Tebow or his mother for their joint prolife ad during the 2010 Super Bowl. While a missionary in Southeast Asia, Pamelea Tebow contracted a

serious illness. To save her life, her doctors wanted her to abort Tim. She refused. It is not only Tebow's religious fervor but also his entire life that serves as an affront to the proponents of the *culture of death*. Despite all this public persecution, Tebow has kept alive his optimism and faith in God. He is an example for Christians on how to combat the subtle persecution of a secular society that dislikes the presence of God in the world and will do everything in its estimable power to eliminate Him and His followers from the face of the earth.

## An Inner Tension

Christians such as Tim Tebow prove everyday that cheerfulness and optimism can go hand in hand with physical exhaustion, sorrow and even subtle persecution. As a result there is an inner tension between Christian optimism and realism. Fallen human nature is at the root of this tension. St. Paul recognized that saints are not perfect and that there would be conflicts at times. He did not pretend that it was all for the best, but said that Christians need to focus on their common bond in Christ. Paul was hopeful that Christians could be one in Christ even though they realized that it would never be an easy thing to do.

Christians must also beware of the *superficial optimist* who denies the reality of the constant battle of good and evil. Such Pollyannas never see or admit anything wrong in life. The Christian optimist needs to have his joyous spirit tempered by the painful realities of life so that his inner happiness and external cheerfulness is not reduced to ephemeral sentimentality and more fitting of a New Age *religion of the heart*.

Optimistic Christians acknowledge the way things are with humility and a true appraisal of what constitutes dangers to life, limb and their immortal souls. They do this within the context of their religious faith, which deepens with each conquest of the world, the flesh and the devil. Through constant and fervent prayer they affirm their deep optimism in God's eternal promises of love and salvation. For a pleasant reminder they need look no further than Philippians 4:13, *I can do all things in Him that strengthens me*.

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