

CATHOLIC

Q & A

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All human beings desire happiness. What is it that makes us truly happy?

The answer lies in understanding the nature of man, the nature of the material world we live in and the nature of God.

Human beings share many things in common with the animals. However, man has an intellect and a will. These two powers or faculties separate man from the brute.

Man's intellect has the power to abstract, reflect and reason. Abstraction allows man to form universal concepts in the mind; these concepts are the basis for all scientific thought and intellectual knowledge. Without the power of abstraction, language and science could not exist.

For example, your sense of sight takes in the object outside such as a tree. Then you see another tree on the left and another on the right and pretty soon you have observed many different trees. The power of abstraction then allows you to form universal concepts about trees, such as all trees have a single main stem (trunk), they also have limbs, bark, roots etc. Once we know the common elements that all trees share, then we can categorize trees in different groups to study their growth patterns, hardness of their wood, climate necessary to grow etc.

This type of abstraction is known as physical abstraction. Man also is capable of mathematical abstraction and metaphysical abstraction. Metaphysical abstraction does not depend on matter for its existence or its definition. When people discuss concepts such as happiness, love, hate, desire, courage, justice etc., they are dealing with metaphysical abstractions. Meta (above) physical (nature). These concepts are above nature, they can be formulated and understood only by a spiritual being. Monkeys are not capable of metaphysical abstraction.

Man therefore has a human nature that is both spiritual and material. Man's material nature along with the material world he lives in is subject to change. Yet man, because he is spiritual, also is capable of knowing truth, which does not change. Change implies imperfection. God, however, as a perfect being and lacking nothing is not subject to change. Because we are created in the image and likeness of God, we too by our

nature, desire unchanging truth. However, we are living in time and space and subject to a changing world.

The culture in which we live denies the spiritual aspect of man and is constantly telling us that we will be happy if we indulge in pleasures of the body (food, drink, sex etc.) Although these actions are necessary to sustain the body and beget children, they can only give us temporary happiness because of our changing nature.

Let us go to the *St Thomas Aquinas* as he speaks about happiness:

Human happiness does not consist in possessing material goods. Material goods are not intrinsic to man but lie outside himself. Furthermore, material possessions are by their nature subject to corruption, decay and obsolescence; therefore happiness does not consist in them.

Human happiness does not consist in honors. Honor does not consist in something done by man, but in something done to him by another. Honor, therefore is not possessed by the individual but is something bestowed by another; therefore happiness cannot be assigned to honors.

Human happiness does not consist in wealth. Wealth is not sought for its own sake but for the sake of something else. Wealth in itself brings us no good, but only when we use it, for the support of our body or some similar purpose. Happiness cannot consist in the possession or preservation of things whose chief advantage for man consists in their being spent.

Human happiness does not consist in worldly power. Worldly power is unstable, and not subject to man's will; and is often obtained by evil men. Man's highest good cannot be used for good or evil. Worldly power can be used for good or evil, therefore man's happiness does not consist in worldly power.

Happiness does not consist in the goods of the body. Man's highest good does not consist in goods of the body, such as health, beauty and strength. For they are common to good or evil, they are unstable, and they are not subject to the will. Moreover, many animals surpass man in goods of the body, for some are fleeter than he, some are more sturdy, and so on. Accordingly, if man's highest good consisted in these things, man would not excel all animals: which is clearly untrue. Therefore human happiness does not consist in goods of the body.

Accordingly, if man's ultimate happiness does not consist in external things, which are called goods of fortune; nor in goods of the body—it remains for us to conclude that man's ultimate happiness consists in the contemplation of truth. God is truth.

I myself have spent most of my adult life trying to attain happiness with worldly wisdom, disregarding to a large degree the teachings of Jesus Christ and his Church. The fruit of this disobedience is emptiness and despair. Prayer, humility and obedience are the tools and Holy Mother Church is the guide for true happiness.

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