

CAREFREE LIVING

We live at the level of our cares. "Wherever your treasure is," says Jesus, "there will your heart be too" (Mt 6:21). Our treasure is what we most care about. Our treasure may be money, it may be power and fame, it may be a human being, or it may be God and the kingdom of God. Whatever it may be, our treasure is our master; we are its servants. We devote our best energy to it and sacrifice whatever is necessary for it.

A mother with her first infant is a picture of focused caring. She is prepared to sacrifice her time, her sleep, her professional career—everything—for the baby who is now the center of her life. If necessary she would be prepared to defend her baby at the cost of her own life. As time passes, other concerns reassert themselves, and the baby becomes one of many cares that the mother treasures in her heart. At times of special need, for example during illness, the baby will again claim first place in the mother's care.

Look at this baby a few years later, when it is a normal, happy child playing in the yard with other children. They laugh and shout and chase each other, or perhaps they are absorbed in an intricate game with their toys. They put themselves totally into their play, with no thought of time passing or of what is on their schedule later that day. An observer of these children at play would say, "They haven't a care in the world." The children know that mother will call them when it is time to eat, that she will comfort them if they get hurt. They have no worries because someone else is looking after all their needs. They are carefree because their mother cares, and they know it.

Which attitude is closer to the Christian ideal—the children's freedom from cares or the mother's sensitive caring about others? Do the carefree children have the healthiest, holiest attitude because they place their trust in a power greater than themselves? Or is the mother's attitude to be preferred because by her caring love she exercises mature responsibility? In what follows, I will explore these two attitudes, carefreeness and care-fulness, without trying to play off one against the other. Carefreeness might be as appropriate in childhood as cares and anxieties are for adults.

“GO AND PLAY, FOREVER!”

Early in the third century, under the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus, six African Christians were arrested, imprisoned, and finally thrown to wild animals in the arena at Carthage. An account of their martyrdom has come down to us, called *The Passion of Sts. Perpetua and Felicity*, and it is considered one of the most authentic records of early Christian beliefs and practices. The account quotes several prophetic visions or dreams that came to these Christians in prison. The dream of Blessed Saturus, companion of Perpetua, includes a description of eternal life as playfulness without end, the culmination of carefree existence. In the dream, Saturus and Perpetua felt themselves being carried by angels into “a vast space that was like a pleasure garden, having rose trees and every kind of flower.” In this garden, which is reminiscent of the garden of paradise, the new martyrs are joyfully greeted by friends who earlier had been burned alive for their faith. These friends and the angels clothe Saturus and Perpetua in white robes and accompany them into a splendid palace to greet their Lord. In the gleaming throne room they hear a chanted refrain, “Holy, holy, holy!” and see the majestic figure of Christ seated among the twenty-four elders as described in the *Book of Revelation*.

Saturus and Perpetua were lifted up by angels to greet their Lord with a kiss and be welcomed by him and by the elders. At this moment of ultimate bliss the two martyrs are given their eternal reward, a kind of password that will give them free access to the pleasure garden with its park-like landscape of flowers, trees, and streams. Without intending to be patronizing, the elders say to them, “Go now and play!” Go and enjoy yourselves in the garden, with nothing to worry about forever! Perpetua turned to Saturus to express her grateful heart: “Thanks be to God! As carefree and happy as I was in the flesh, I will be so even more in this place.” In the dream they walk off together toward the park that will be their home and playground forever.

As dreams are made of the material of everyday life, this dream about heaven reflects

the beliefs and attitudes of these early Christians. They expected heaven to be an extension of their joy and carefreeness in the present life. Anything less than that would not be worth suffering for in the arena. The image that best expressed their idea of heaven was playing forever in a garden of inexhaustible pleasures, described in terms of a cosmic Disneyland.

"DO NOT WORRY!"

Where did the early Christians get this idea of the kingdom of God as perpetual carefree play? The New Testament is not without pages that extol carefreeness and propose the playful child as the model disciple of Christ. One day when the companions of Jesus were scolding the crowds for bringing their children to Jesus, he became indignant and said: *Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. In truth I tell you, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it* (Mk 10:14-15).

Children have several qualities that Jesus may have wished to recommend for imitation, but he surely knew that children love to play. He had observed "children squatting in the city squares and calling to their playmates" (Lk 7:32 NAB). Children also cry and feel anguish, but more characteristic is their spontaneity and celebration of life. They live fully in the present moment of activity without dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. The wholeheartedness of their play springs from inner carefreeness. Childhood is not the season for anxiety.

Jesus himself managed to preserve the carefree attitude of childhood even in times of danger. During a storm on the sea, the boat carrying Jesus and his disciples began to ship water badly. "Jesus was in the stern, his head on the cushion, asleep. They woke him and said to him, 'Master, do you not care? We are lost!'" (Mk 4:38). He could afford not to worry, since he knew how to escape the danger simply by saying to the sea: "Quiet now! Be calm!" (Mk 4:39). Jesus was not one to worry about physical danger or about what others might think. He had a reputation for not being swayed by rank. Even the Pharisees had to admire him for this: "You

are not afraid of anyone because human rank means nothing to you" (Mt 22:16).

Jesus advised his followers to adopt his own carefree attitude and stop their worrying. He reprimanded Martha for worrying about the meal she was preparing: "Martha, Martha, you worry and fret about so many things" (Lk 10:41). He predicted that his followers would be persecuted, but told them not to worry about their defense: "When you are handed over, do not worry about how to speak or what to say" (Mt 10:19). In the parable of the sower he warned that "the worries of the world" could choke the word of God planted in the heart (Mk 4:19). In place of worrying, Jesus proposed a deep trust in the providential plan of God who knows all that we need. "Can any of you, however much you worry, add a single cubit to your span of life? If a very small thing is beyond your powers, why worry about the rest?" (Lk 12:25-26).

We know from the letters of St. Paul and St. Peter that the early Christian community tried to live with the carefree, trusting attitude recommended by Jesus. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I should like you to have your minds free from all worry" (literally, 'without cares,' 1 Cor 7:32). To the Philippians he said, "Never worry about anything" (Phil 4:6). He did not deny the existence of needs and problems in daily life, but his solution was to bring these intentions before God in prayer and to have confidence in God's loving care. The first letter of Peter puts it in a concise phrase: "Unload all your burden on to [God], since he is concerned about you" (1 Pt 5:7).

THE CAREFREE ONES

Confidence in God's' unceasing care makes a Christian the most carefree of people. Christians of the fourth century who went out into the desert to live a life of prayer and penance made carefreeness one of their major principles. Experience taught them that they could not pray with undistracted attention if their hearts were filled with cares. Writing from a monastery in the desert of Sinai in the seventh century, St. John Climacus said: "Whoever wants to keep his mind clear for the presence of God and yet permits himself to be troubled

by cares is like a man who has his feet in fetters and yet tries to run.”

Desiring a carefree life, these Christians reduced their needs and simplified their style of life as much as possible. They thought of the words of Jesus: “I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and what you are to wear” (Mt 6:25). They remembered the prophet Elijah who was fed with bread and meat by ravens during a lengthy drought (1 Kgs 17:6). The Christian desert-dwellers never experienced easy living, but they always had enough to sustain them; they worked, they had benefactors, they shared with one another. For them it was more important to be carefree than to be comfortable.

The tradition of carefreeness was preserved especially by eastern Christians of the Hesychast tradition, those who practiced the prayer of stillness, *hesychia*. They recognized that anxiety was a form of slavery. St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) said: “When your thoughts are filled with anxiety about the affairs of life, you are not free. You are oppressed and enslaved by these anxieties, and worry either about yourself or about others.” Symeon believed it was possible to work in such a way that one was carefree and yet did not neglect or forget anything at all, even the most insignificant details. He said: “We should make it our care to work without care.” Symeon's secret was to look upon all his duties as a form of play. He was responsible, but took his responsibilities lightly, playfully. He was efficient and earnest but not anxious. The Hesychast ideal was to rest confidently in the divine solicitude.

There is, then, a Christian tradition of carefreeness, with its roots in the gospel. In more recent centuries, the spiritual masters have preferred other terms to express the same reality. A book attributed to Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751) teaches carefreeness under the title *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) described her “little way of spiritual childhood” based on love and trust in God's care. A carefree attitude springs from confidence in divine support along the path of life: “Entrust your cares to the Lord and he will support you; he will never allow the just one to Stumble” (Ps 55:23).

Nevertheless, cares are part of human life; what we love

we care about. The person who does not care one way or another about anyone or anything is not a model of Christian or human wholeness. St. Paul preached carefree carefreeness but he cared deeply about the Christian communities he had founded: "There is, day in and day out, the pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor 11:28). Adulthood brings responsibilities, and the will of God may impose additional tasks and responsibilities. All of these make for legitimate cares and concerns. How is it possible to be genuinely carefree in the midst of inevitable cares? The following sections explore this question.

WORRIES WITHOUT END

From time to time pollsters take a sampling of opinions in the general population to discover what is uppermost in people's minds. These statistics are useful to politicians and others as indicators of current trends. The trends shift in response to major national and international events, but one concern that is always near the top of the list is the economy. People worry about money. They also worry about personal issues of health, safety, reputation, appearance, and relationships with others. Money, however, remains a preoccupation for many.

The poor worry because there is never enough money, but the rich also worry, sometimes even more than the poor. J.G. Donders, in *Jesus the Stranger*, tells the story of a wealthy landowner who worried about his fortune right up to the moment of death. He loved all his money and even built a safe for it in his bedroom. Years later he lay on his bed dying. Realizing that the end was near, he decided to make his peace with God. He summoned a priest and received the last sacraments. In the final moments of his life the dying man was seen to reach under his pillow for something. Those standing around his bed wondered if it was a crucifix he wanted to kiss, or a medal he wanted to hold. "It was the key to his safe; he put it in his mouth, and he swallowed it, while he died."

This was a man who wanted to make peace with God but also wanted to take his money with him when he died. The Sermon on the Mount made it clear that no one can serve

two masters: "You cannot be the slave both of God and of money" (Mt 6:24). Jesus wanted his disciples to put their trust in God rather than in the securities they had piled up for themselves. "Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you worth much more than they are?" (Mt 6:26). The carefree attitude is no license for shirking work and avoiding responsibilities. We are to sow and reap, cook and clean, and do everything else necessary to support ourselves and our families, but without anxiety. We know we are more important in our heavenly Father's eyes than the songbirds he cares for so devotedly.

Worrying is characteristic of those who have laid heavy burdens on their own shoulders, especially the burden of doing everything themselves. When they think about all they have to do and how little time and money they have to do it with, they feel overwhelmed. A long sigh of hopelessness can often be heard from the worrier. Sighs and groans are a safety valve that provide temporary relief from the pressure of anxiety. With a sigh they push aside weariness and pick up their burden of cares once more.

To such people Jesus once said, "Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Carefree people can be free of worry even when they have much to worry about, because they have shifted their burden of care to another's shoulders. They have turned over to the Lord Jesus the burden of their past with its failures and mistakes, the burden of the present with its immediate problems and temptations, and the burden of the future with its unknown eventualities. All these burdens they have brought to the one who says, "Come to me", and have left them with him. Accepting his invitation, they have laid down the enormous load they were carrying; now they stride with light and carefree steps. Their sighs of despair and their furrowed brows have been exchanged for a relaxed and confident manner. Their song is "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

THE PATH TO BURNOUT

When the burden of cares becomes too great for the heart to bear, our precious

capacity for caring protects itself by shutting down; the system burns itself out. People in the helping professions—nurses, psychiatrists, social workers, clergy, and others—are prime candidates for burnout. Most of them are sensitive, caring people by temperament as well as profession. They take others' pains to heart until their own heart breaks. They give of themselves until they have nothing left to give. The result is a burned out life, a helper who is in need of help in order to recover a sense of purpose. Some helpers are over-achievers who become addicted to helping, healing, solving others' problems, making things better for others. They can be called helpaholics, because they have a compulsion to lend a helping hand. Helpaholics are only human after all, and have only two hands to lend; compulsive helping ends in burnout sooner or later.

In Graham Greene's novel, *A Burnt-Out Case*, a man named Query is afflicted with a kind of spiritual leprosy that eats away his every reason for living. Query desired only to pass the time. He had no interest in anything, no feeling for human beings, no love. He was burnt-out. A more clinical description of burnout is given by Dr. Rosalind Forbes, a stress consultant in New York. She finds such people to be depressed and negative, self-doubting, unable to make decisions, and inclined to overindulge in pills, food, or alcohol [<http://crl.acrl.org/content/44/3/245.full.pdf>]. They grasp at whatever might provide temporary relief for their burden of stress and worry. Permanent relief can come to them only from a radical change in attitude and lifestyle. If they can be helped to make these changes, which are spiritual as well as occupational, their zest for life can be restored and they can become effective helpers once more.

Recovery from burnout depends partly on admitting one's own human limitations. We cannot do everything that needs to be done. It is enough for us to do a few things well and leave the rest to the One who clothes the flowers of the field so splendidly (Mt 6:30). Burnout shatters the illusion of our omnipotence, and brings us face to face with our basic poverty. When we can no longer care for ourselves, much less for others, we are obliged to turn to the care of One who loves us precisely in our poverty. We can afford to be carefree when we

know we are cared for “Your heavenly Father,” says Jesus, “knows all that you need. Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God's saving justice, and all these other things will be given you as well” (Mt 6:33).

THE WORRIES OF TODAY

Jesus did not promise that we would be given “all these other things” (Mt 6:34) before we actually need them. Anxiety comes from living in the future and worrying about what will happen tomorrow. Carefreeness comes from living in the present and receiving the gift of the present moment. “So do not worry about tomorrow,” says Jesus, “tomorrow will take care of itself” (Mt 6:34). Tomorrow we will be given what we need for tomorrow. Today's troubles are enough for today (Mt 6:34). When we say in the Lord's Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread,” we pray for whatever we need to get through the present day. Tomorrow we will repeat the same prayer, with the same carefree confidence.

It is the very poor—those who do not know where their next meal is coming from—who can teach us this lesson of confidence. In third-world countries, the poor manage to survive from day to day on whatever comes their way. If there is a surplus, they are more likely to share it with others than to save it for tomorrow. In Chile a religious brother was returning to his monastery on a weekend, after doing business in the city. He stopped to pick up three-poor hitchhikers. They were standing close together on the roadside, trying to keep one another from collapsing into a drunken sleep. As they climbed, with some difficulty, into the back of pickup, one of them admitted, “We are a little drunk today.” Trying not to embarrass them, the brother murmured something about how good it must be to celebrate after working hard all week; he tried not to think about how the mens’ families would get through the coming week without their paycheck. The man who had spoken before gave the brother a confident smile and said, “Everything is okay. There is a God!”

The carefree confidence of these poor peasants resembles the insight of the mystics into the providence of God. Julian of Norwich, in her fifteenth-century work *Revelations*, pictures God

saying: "I will make all things well. I shall make all things well. I may make all things well, and I can make all things well. And thou shalt see thyself that all things shall be well." Julian adds a qualifier. She says we know in general that all shall be well, but we do not know it now "except as it belongs to us for the time." That is, if we need to know, we shall know it. She means that we are to live from day to day, with optimism about the present moment and tremendous trust about the future. This is carefree living.

Carefree living goes against our natural instinct to look out for our own future. We like to know in advance, and be prepared. Will we perform successfully when called upon? Or will we forget all our lines when the spotlight is shining on us. Carefree living means that we have enough confidence to put aside our script for the future and try instead to respond fully and authentically to the demands of the immediate moment. Jesus advised his disciples:

When you are handed over, do not worry about how to speak or what to say; what you are to say will be given to you when the time comes, because it is not you who will be speaking;

the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you (Mt 10:19-20).

The young who still have their health and energy tend to be optimistic about their future. The elderly often become anxious about their security and their health. Will their insurance be sufficient? Will they get cancer? Some measure of prudent concern is surely justified, but it is possible to go to the extreme of worrying oneself sick. Anxious worry about falling sick can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Carefreeness would counsel a different attitude toward the future. "Can any of you, however much you worry, add one single cubit to your span of life?" (Mt 6:27). The future is largely unknown, but the future is in God's good hands. "We are well aware that God works with those who love him, those who have been called in accordance with his purpose, and turns everything to their good" (Rom 8:28). "Everything" would include all losses, all illnesses, all accidents. Even these negative possibilities can somehow work together for our ultimate good. We can be carefree about that future which God, out of love, is preparing for us.

SPIRITUAL ANXIETY

Anxiety about spiritual matters is no more healthy or holy than anxiety about our material security. Spiritual anxiety is not a problem for non-religious people; their problem is just the opposite--a careless indifference to God and to divine law. Spiritual anxiety is one of the occupational hazards of the pious. Their piety helps them to be carefree about their material welfare and security, but it exposes them to infinite worries about their relationship with God. Martin Luther was tormented by the question, "How can I find a gracious God?" The pious are inclined toward scruples and doubts about their spiritual standing in God's sight. Have they done everything they are obliged to do? Have they done it perfectly, with the right motivation and attentiveness? These questions weigh heavily on delicate consciences and lead to spiritual anxiety.

St. Luke's gospel tells the story of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector of Jericho. When Jesus came to Jericho, Zacchaeus was curious about this man whose reputation as a healer and prophet had preceded him. I think Zacchaeus was more than simply curious. I think that for some reason—I speculate a scrupulous conscience—he was desperate to see Jesus and afraid that he might miss his chance, because of the crowd and because of being short. He was so anxious that he risked an accident and went out on a limb of a sycamore tree to be sure of catching a glimpse as Jesus passed by. "When Jesus reached the spot he looked up and spoke to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I am to stay at your house today'" (Lk 19:5). The hope of this nimble tax collector was fulfilled; salvation came to his house that day. His scrupulous conscience was put to rest after he promised to make restitution to everybody.

Evidently we are justified in being anxious about our salvation. We know we cannot please God by careless service and perfunctory worship. "It is not anyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' who will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21). When we have sincerely done the will of our heavenly Father, we have done the best we can. To scruple and worry beyond that point is spiritual anxiety. To

indulge in excessive self-scrutiny about our religious performance is spiritual anxiety. We need to be conscientious but not to the point of losing a playful, childlike freedom in the service of God. We have a right to be carefree and at home in the house of God. God remains a loving Father, or Mother, to all who are seeking the kingdom of heaven.

Those who dedicate a portion of their time to meditation are sometimes anxious about their state of prayer. If they consult the writings of the mystics, they may become still more confused by the complex instructions about dark nights and spiritual mansions. Worries about acquired or infused contemplation can make us just as anxious as worldly cares. There is nothing wrong with learning something about mystical theology, but the important thing is to go on praying as best we can. We may never know whether we are in the highest spiritual mansion or still in the basement, but we know that God loves us infinitely and wants to draw us into ever increasing intimacy. As long as we are faithful to prayer, we can be carefree about what state or degree we have attained. Worrying accomplishes nothing; carefreeness is the sign of a strong, steady relationship with God.

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS

Etty Hillesum was a Dutch Jew who died at twenty-nine in Auschwitz in 1943. She wanted to be a short story writer, but the circumstances of war changed her plans. Her journal has been published under the title, *An Interrupted Life*. Life brought Etty Hillesum much to worry about, but she became a model of carefreeness. Her trust in God was expressed in daily prayer and in her total affirmation and acceptance of life in all its forms. Life as a whole is good and trustworthy even if it brings suffering to individuals. She said, "I am not alone in my tiredness or sickness or fears, but at one with millions of others from many centuries and it is all part of life." Life was her treasure and she gave herself to it without reserve.

In the transit concentration camp where she tried to help those who were suffering most, Etty found words of life in St. Matthew's gospel. She writes, "My latest treasure is the

birds of the air and the lilies of the fields of Matthew 6:33.” As she interpreted the text, it was not an invitation to be passive but to do what she could for others while trusting in the protective presence of God in the camp itself. Being carefree in a concentration camp is pushing carefreeness to its extreme, but this is what we sense when Etty compares herself to a nestling bird: “I had the feeling that I was resting against the naked breast of life; one could feel her gentle and regular heartbeat; I felt safe and protected.”

In her carefreeness, Etty Hillesum continued to concern herself with the immediate needs of others in the camp. She prayed for the other internees, wrote letters for them, tried to console them with a cheerful word or a friendly hug. The final words of her diary are: “We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.” Carefreeness does not dispense us from the obligation to be caring people, caring about the welfare of others and doing what we can for them. Carefreeness only liberates us from useless anxiety in our caring. Etty Hillesum's life was tragically interrupted, but her heart had found its treasure and its fulfillment in sharing with others. With allusion to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke and to the feeding of the four thousand by Jesus, she says: “I have broken my body like bread and shared it out among men. And why not, they were hungry and had gone without for so long.”

CONCLUSION

In history unfolds in the third millennium after Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, a carefree attitude is not easy to maintain. The planet itself is under constant threat from nuclear war and from an industrial and post-industrial economy that is undermining the bio-system. There is much to be concerned about if we are trying to live responsibly on this planet. Christian carefreeness does not try to repress legitimate concerns. Carefreeness is the attitude of those who remain deeply concerned but even more deeply confident in God who holds our future, our race, and our planet in gentle, caring hands. Our cares, both personal and planetary, will be there to face us every morning, but so will the divine solicitude that knows all that we need (see Mt 6:32).

The attitude of carefreeness enables us to discharge our responsibilities without anxiety. Instead of being obsessed with cares and worries, we operate out of an abiding confidence in God. Freedom from worry flows from that fund of trust in God; it is not the direct object of our desire. Deliberately seeking carefreeness is like deliberately trying to be spontaneous and natural. The result would be contrived, because it does not come from the deepest originality within us. Trying not to worry is only adding one more thing to worry about. Christian carefreeness overflows from an unshakable conviction that if we set our hearts on God's kingdom first, all these other things will be given us as well. Therefore, "Do not worry about tomorrow" (Mt 6:33).