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David Vincent Meconi S.J.
Saint Louis University

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Christianity, Happiness, and the Good Life

DAVID VINCENT MECONI, S.J.
SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

True happiness is always the byproduct of excellence. The classical understanding of excellence, *arete*, is etymologically rooted in a Greek word to pray (*araomai*), thus conveying the sense of something received, something realized only when in right relationship to a higher "other." Similarly, happiness in the Christian tradition is also understood to be more of a consequent result than a direct goal. That is why I would argue that one should strive to live not a happy but a beautiful life. For amid all the chaos of children, the sacrifice of sickness, the perseverance of vows satisfied, happiness may not be immediately present, but the beauty and integrity of serving others and of keeping one's promises shines forth. Happiness is by nature elusive and can be sought only through noble pursuits, through the human person's flourishing as one fulfills his or her vocation in life.

For the Christian, this vocation is the beauty of becoming God-like: loving, merciful, truthful, immortal, and joyful. Such qualities are appropriated only through prayer and the proper worship of God-made-flesh. Why so? As the perfect human, only Christ can reveal the full worth of all human persons. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of the human person take on light... [Jesus] blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning" (*Gaudium et Spes* §22). By entering the human condition, God shows each how he or she eternally matters. In return, fidelity to God results in the faithful's new meaning, a new way of living this life. The coming of God in the flesh, then, is the beginning of the great love affair that brings perfect, personal, and eternal happiness to those willing and humble enough to receive him. This reception results in the "great exchange" in the belief that in God's becoming like us, we can become like God. Only here, would I maintain, can human persons realize a happiness that is not only attainable through human integrity but a happiness that is ultimate and everlasting.