



# The Theology of Pleasure

## THE FULLNESS OF HAPPINESS

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*Mitchell Kalpakgian, a Contributing Editor of the NOR, is Professor of Humanities at Wyoming Catholic College in Lander. He is the author of *The Marvelous in Fielding's Novels* (University of America Press), *The Mysteries of Life in Children's Literature* (Neumann Press), *An Armenian Family Reunion* (Neumann Press), and the forthcoming *Wisdom Ever Ancient, Ever New* (Neumann Press).*

**It is common to associate pleasure with the temptations of the flesh or with the Epicurean philosophy of hedonism — “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” “Seize the day” (carpe diem), or “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.” The “theology of pleasure,” however, views the enjoyment of the senses as a God-given gift that reveals He who created man for happiness, heavenly beatitude, and eternal joy. The theology of pleasure also encompasses other**

**forms of happiness besides the delight of the senses — intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual pleasures enrich the quality of human experience.** Although the seven deadly sins include the sins of the flesh — gluttony, lust, avarice, sloth — **the natural pleasures of eating in moderation, expressing marital love in conjugal relations, and earning money honestly and spending it prudently do not fall into the category of vice.**

**God created man to enjoy the various delights of the senses in the Garden of Eden.** In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Eve experiences the sensuous beauty of Paradise as she marvels at the glory of the day and the beauty of spring:

Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,  
With charm of earliest Birds; pleasant the Sun  
When first on this delightful Land he spreads  
His orient Beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flower.

The Garden is ordered to man's delectation: "All things to man's delightful use." Adam and Eve behold the splendor of the flowers, contemplate the radiance of the stars, taste the deliciousness of the fruit, and exchange "the Rites/Mysterious of connubial Love." **The experience of the goodness of the natural pleasures of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, as well as the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional pleasures of the soul, reveals God as the Author of inexhaustible joy who created man for happiness**

**in all its fullness**, inspiring man to sing with David in Psalm 23, “Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.”

A man wakes in the morning and enjoys the **exercise** of walking, jogging, or biking, experiencing the beauty of the day, the serenity of dawn. He returns home to refresh his body with a bath or **shower** and then proceeds to regale himself with the tastes and smells of a hearty **breakfast**. These **preparations of the body** provide energy and strength to perform the day’s work, whether it is using one’s body or mind, skill, or other talents in performing labors of duty or love. In the midst of daily toil, human interaction — conversation, laughter — can punctuate the day and lift the spirits. The noon **meal** offers a different selection of foods to nourish the body and soul, offering the anticipation of a new pleasure, perhaps in the **company of congenial friends** who add the liveliness of mirth to the relish of the meal. As the afternoon hours follow, the **end of the workday** awaits with its accompanying rewards: **a clear conscience** in doing an **honest day’s labor**, **relaxation at home**, or **recreation in the pursuit of a favorite hobby**. Looking forward to **dinner with the entire family** at home offers the best of company, and perhaps one’s favorite meal. The pleasure of **conversation with a spouse**, the enjoyment of **playing with children**, the delight of hearing one’s **favorite music**, the stimulation of a **good book**, and maybe the surprise of a **friendly letter** in the day’s mail add to the various joys of the day and provide a sense of the fullness of happiness that is

possible on the best of days. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, **“No man can live without pleasure,” and God, in His infinite goodness, has created a world with plentiful sources of joy and happiness for all people.**

In the course of a year, a person may enjoy the varied pleasures of the four seasons — from skating, skiing, and snowboarding in winter to fishing, swimming, and boating in summer. Each year brings its festive holidays and religious celebrations. Birthdays, anniversaries, engagements, weddings, and baptisms also fill the calendar with commemorative social occasions that rejoice the spirit and keep one in love with life. This multiplicity of pleasures during the various stages of the year illustrates the truth that life always offers some special joy to look forward to.

**A life of happiness is not only the enjoyment of the present moment but also the anticipation of some later source of joy that awaits its proper time.** The child who revels in play, the young couple who fall in love, the parents who rejoice in the births of their children, the grandparents who behold the happiness of their children’s children — the goodness of life is experienced in the fullness of our time. God in His wisdom prepares His gifts of pleasure according to the seasons of life and according to the stages of man. As Solomon observes, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (Eccl. 3:1). God does not leave man empty-handed as he progresses through life, but

always provides occasions of hope in familiar pleasures and newfound joys.

**This life of God-given pleasure is not limited to the delight of the five senses. The life of the mind and the desire for truth lead to the joy of philosophy, the love of wisdom or knowledge.** As St. Augustine observes, “The happy life consists in rejoicing in the truth.” Imlac, the poet and sage in Dr. Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*, remarks, **“Knowledge is certainly one of the means of pleasure, as is confessed by the natural desire which every mind feels of increasing its ideas.... We grow more happy as our minds take a wider range.”** As the mind acquires wide knowledge from a variety of sources — travel, conversation, books, and reason — it acquires a mind “replete with images,” and increases its capacity for the enjoyment of life in its fullness.

Lady Philosophy explains in Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy* that a mind in a state of self-possession, acting in accordance with its true rational nature, achieves equanimity in its possession of the truth about goodness and God’s divinity: **“You cannot impose anything on a free mind, and you cannot move from its state of inner tranquility a mind at peace with itself and firmly founded on reason.”** In *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Cardinal Newman explains the special pleasure of the love of knowledge: “Nothing is excellent, beautiful, desirable for its own sake, but it overflows, and spreads the likeness of itself all around it. Good is prolific; it is not only good to the eye,

but to the taste; it not only attracts us, but it communicates itself; it excites first our admiration and love, then our desire and gratitude.... A great good will impart a great good.”

**The life of the mind affords its own natural pleasures, whether it is the satisfaction of improving one’s knowledge, the pure joy of learning for its own sake, or the repose and equanimity that accompanies the possession of the truth.** In Cardinal Newman’s words, “Where shall philosophical repose be found but in the consciousness and enjoyment of large intellectual possessions?”

**Aesthetic pleasures complement intellectual pleasures.** The masterpieces of music range from Gregorian chant to folk music to the baroque music of Bach, Vivaldi, and Handel, and other great composers. The masterpieces of art offer the works of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael, the sculpture of Greek statues, and the architecture of Gothic cathedrals. The contemplation of truth and beauty leads the mind to a knowledge of what St. **Thomas Aquinas calls the Transcendentals — the one, the good, the true, and the beautiful — forms of being that are inexhaustible and boundless because there can never be a limit to noble deeds, great truths, or beautiful works of art.**

The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins especially captures this great pleasure of contemplating the mystery of the copious beauty of creation. In “Pied Beauty” he writes:

Glory be to God for dappled things!  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut — falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced — fold, fallow, and plow;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

Throughout all of nature, Hopkins beholds the art of the Creator. The “pied” (mixed, multicolored) beauty of the sky with its patchwork of white clouds and blue background, or with its blended hues of red, yellow, and orange at sunrise and sunset, resembles the “brinded” (brindled) cow with its mixture of white streaks and brown background. This splendor of color illuminates not only the sky above and the animals on land but also adorns the fish below as rainbow trout sparkle with iridescent beams of light and reflect configurations of rose moles, another example of “dappled” or dotted patterns “all in stipple.” The gradations of light emitted by chestnuts roasting, or the flashes of light displayed by finches, manifest the same overflowing abundance of beauty that adorns all of nature, great or small, animal or fish, sky or land. As above, so below. The contours of the land and the undulations of the landscape resemble a patchwork quilt or motley dress mixed with all the dazzle of spectacular color. The land in all its stages of sowing and reaping — “fold, fallow, and plow” — reflects the same original art of God whose masterpieces all have the same signature and style whether it is the “couple-colored” sky or the land “plotted and pieced” in its own array of multifarious colors.

Spiritual pleasures as well accompany intellectual and aesthetic pleasures. The quintessence of spiritual happiness is the enjoyment of peace, the peace that Christ offers when He utters, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (Jn. 14:27).** As St. Augustine writes in his **Confessions**, **“You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you.”** Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* also explains the way to true peace: **“True peace of heart can be found only by resisting the passions, not by yielding to them,”** and **“True peace dwells only in the heart of the humble.”** This peace that passes all understanding comes only to he who prepares his heart and soul to receive God: **“Christ will come to you, and impart his consolations to you if you prepare a worthy dwelling for him in your heart.”** Just as the bride adorns and beautifies herself in anticipation of the coming of the bridegroom, the soul too must purify itself and possess a clean and contrite heart to welcome the visitation of the Divine Spouse. The soul as bride prepares itself by controlling the passions, by exerting patience in enduring adversities, and by cultivating humility, recollection, silence, and purity of heart. As Christ speaks to the disciple in à Kempis’s spiritual masterpiece, **“My peace is with the humble and gentle of heart, and depends on great patience.”** The soul that retains the virtue of faith believes that God will keep His promises just as the bride awaits her bridegroom; she trusts his word and her heart leaps at the sound of his voice. Christ too



always comes if the soul believes and trusts: “Where is your faith? Stand firm, and persevere. Be courageous and patient, and help will come to you in due time. Wait patiently for Me, and I myself will come and heal you.”

The Rule of St. Benedict also presents an ideal of spiritual life that rejoices the soul. In its balanced way of life and spirit of moderation, **the rule governs the day with prayer, manual labor, study, and recreation that is infused with simplicity, silence, restraint, and gentleness — a way of life that leads to peace with one’s environment, peace with one’s neighbor, peace with one’s self, and, ultimately, peace with God.** As Christopher Derrick explains in *The Rule of Peace*, the secret of St. Benedict’s peace comes from the vow of stability, “a strong sense of rooted permanence and belonging,” from a domestic environment where all “live together as equals, but also under an unfashionably paternalistic kind of authority,” from “the physical peace of the household, its actual silence, the absence of noise,” and from the “long-established and elaborate patterns of ritual courtesy.”

**Spiritual pleasure is the fruit of man’s union with God, and our greatest spiritual pleasure is receiving our Lord with humility and gratitude in the Holy Eucharist.** Thomas à Kempis compares the Eucharist to a heavenly banquet: “How sweet and delightful the Feast in which You give yourself to be our food!” **This extraordinary spiritual joy transcends all man’s expectations and ideas: “Whenever you celebrate or hear Mass, it should be as great, as**

**fresh and as joyful to you as if on this very day Christ had come down for the first time into the womb of the Virgin and was made man.**” When the soul welcomes God’s visitation, it is in awe of the munificence of God’s bountiful love: “How great a Lord does the soul receive! How beloved the Guest she welcomes! How delightful the Companion she invites to enter! How faithful the Friend she makes! How gracious and noble the Spouse she embraces — one to be loved and desired above all others!”

God truly is prodigal with His myriad gifts of pleasure. “He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change,” as Hopkins writes. All these tastes of goodness, glimpses of beauty, discoveries of truth, and experiences of spiritual joy illuminate the mystery and nature of God who is Goodness itself, Absolute Truth, and perfect Beauty. Our Lord has filled the heavens by scattering the stars in the sky, and the earth by broadcasting all the seeds to provide the cornucopia of the harvest.