

**Homily for Annual All Schools Mass in Quincy
Quincy Notre Dame High School**

**Memorial of Saint Jerome, Priest and Doctor of the Church
September 30, 2015**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here for this annual All Schools Mass for the city of Quincy. It is wonderful that we can all be together under one roof, sharing our common Catholic faith in the greatest gift that we have, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist! Not only are all of us united here, but we are united with Catholics throughout the world, along with all of the angels and saints in Heaven – something that happens each time we go to Mass.

There is something else that unites us – young and old, near and far – and that is something that we all long for in our lives. You might be thinking to yourself what that might be. It might sound a little strange to us, because we all have different likes and interests. For those of you who are young, maybe in the first few years of school, you might be thinking about things you might like to have, such as a certain toy, game, or device. Those of you who are a little older, maybe middle school age, you might

long for being well-liked among your peers, wanting to fit in during this time of so many transitions.

For those of you in high school, maybe some of you who are athletes, you long to win your next game, maybe even a state championship. For the teachers, maybe all you really want is for your students to be quiet during class and to listen to what you say, and not just listen, but actually do what you say!

All of these are different things, so how can we say that they are the same? Well, what do all of these things promise to us who desire them? They promise that one thing we all desire – happiness! Everything we do is directed toward achieving happiness. Even if we do something that is not right, we do it because we think it will bring us some sort of happiness. So I am confident in saying that we are all united – even those of us who are not Catholic – in our desire for happiness.

But what is happiness? For many of us, we think of happiness as being a nice, warm feeling. We desire things that will make us feel good, and so we will work hard to get that good feeling. Notice, however, that

the effort that we make in order to get to that happiness does not always involve feeling good. Let me give you an example from my own life.

In just over a week, I will be running my twenty-first marathon. Just because I have run several marathons does not mean that it is easy to do! It requires a lot of training, putting in a lot of miles over several months. This training does not always feel good, but I willingly undertake it because I know it will prepare me to run the full marathon. I remember the first time I ran a mile when I was in high school. My lungs burned, my legs hurt, and my heart was pounding. I hated it. Yet within a short time I would take up running as a hobby. Why? Because I, like you, look for happiness, and it is a very happy experience to cross the finish line after running 26.2 miles! I also started running because three of my grandparents died in their fifties from heart disease, and I figured I had better do something to stay in shape if I wanted to live past 55! So running has indeed brought me the happiness of good health for many years!

Isn't this true about so many things that we think will bring us happiness? We willingly submit to difficult things because they point to something which brings happiness. Think of our experience in school. We

put in a lot of work studying for a test, because we know that effort will prepare us to get a good grade, which will then help us to get into a good college, which will help us to get a good job, which will allow us to have nice things that will, so we think, make us happy! Getting to that goal is a lot of work and often not much fun, but we do it because we want what we think will bring us happiness at the end of that long road.

All of this, as I said, is something that all human beings share, that desire for happiness. Our Christian faith takes this basic human desire and enhances it. God, who has created our human nature, knows what will make us truly happy, and so it is worth at least hearing what He has to say to us on this topic, and so we turn to the Gospel that we just heard.

The Gospel passage is that we just heard is that famous one from the Sermon on the Mount known as the Beatitudes. For each of the beatitudes, Jesus begins by saying, "Blessed are you . . ." That word 'blessed' can be translated in various ways. One translation for that word is 'happy.' So the Beatitudes are pointing us to happiness. But this biblical notion of happiness is more than just a good feeling. It's a happiness that points to something beyond what this life can guarantee. It points to eternal

happiness in Heaven. This is how our faith enhances the desire for happiness – it points us to a happiness that lasts forever, even after we pass away from this life. Every other form of earthly happiness will ultimately be lacking in some way, leaving us wanting more. The happiness of being in Heaven so much greater and so much more beautiful than anything this world could ever offer.

Hopefully, we all desire this form of happiness. But, just as with achieving happiness in worldly things, gaining this happiness often involves things which don't always seem to be happy, enjoyable, or comfortable. We see this when we read the Beatitudes, as Jesus says things which sound difficult to us. He says that we will be happy when we mourn. He says that we will be happy when people are mean to us and hurt us because of our faith. Initially, all of these Beatitudes sound unattractive, but when we understand their connection to true happiness, not just in this life, but, more importantly, in the life to come, we should be willing to trust in Jesus and let ourselves adopt those attitudes with faith and hope.

As I said, our faith enhances this desire for holiness by inviting us to see things from a perspective that is not just about feeling good all of the time. At the heart of the Christian understanding of happiness is the shift away from just being concerned about ourselves and what we want. We are invited to see that what is just as important is that others are happy as well. If we forget others, we try to gain happiness often at the expense of another person. But when we are aware of others, we will do what we can to ensure that as many people as possible are as happy, even if that means that we have to be a little uncomfortable or unhappy for a time.

A recent study¹ looked at happiness among teenagers. The results concluded that young people experience happiness when they undertake risks and feel a sense of discomfort. Surprisingly, those uncomfortable, risk-taking actions were not what we might think, like bungee jumping or skydiving. Rather, the activities that caused them so much discomfort were various forms of community service in which they engaged. They experienced a sense of fulfillment knowing that they had helped somebody else, and that the world doesn't just revolve around them and their desire for instant gratification.

This study should not be surprising to us, because it is exactly what our Catholic faith tells us. Living the Gospel way of life, loving God and loving our neighbor, though uncomfortable and risky at times, carries great rewards, because it touches the lives of others. As Catholics, we are a part of the Body of Christ, and when one member suffers or is unhappy, it affects us all. But when one rejoices and is happy, we all share in that happiness (cf. 1 Cor 12:26).

In a world that tries to capitalize on our desire for happiness in so many self-centered ways, we, as Christians, are called to choose a different route. We are called to be intentional about putting our selfish desires for happiness aside and living a Gospel-centered life in which we are always on the lookout for how we can help to contribute to the happiness of others. We are invited to take risks, being uncomfortable from time to time, knowing that the Lord will reward us and those to whom we reach out with a true experience of happiness.

There are so many opportunities in our daily lives to do this. For example, when you hear people gossiping about somebody else, don't chime in, and better yet, say something good about that person. It might

mean being made fun of yourself, but imagine what it would do for the person being treated poorly. Maybe you could go out of your way to say hello, or give a smile to somebody who has been getting on your nerves. You may not feel like it, but it will go a long way toward breaking down the barrier between you and them. When somebody does better than you in sports or on an assignment, congratulate them, and don't let those feelings of envy creep in to steal your happiness, which can happen so easily at your age.

We all want to be happy, and Jesus has given us the surest way of achieving the true happiness that we long for in the depths of our hearts. It is true that the path that He proposes may seem difficult and unattractive at times, but our faith reminds us to stay on the path and He promises that we will discover that great gift of happiness. We don't have to take this path alone, for He is always available to assist us, to guide us, and to strengthen us, especially as we receive the gift of His life in the Holy Eucharist. So let us ask God for the grace to follow His plan for happiness, not putting it off until next week, next month, or next year. Let us start now, taking those risks and expressing our love for others, thus beginning

to experience already here and now the type of happiness that is a little taste of the happiness of eternity which awaits us at the end of this exciting journey of our faith!

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Price-Mitchell, Marilyn, "What Happy Teenagers Do Differently," *Psychology Today*, 15 July 2013. <http://www.psychologytoday.com>.