



## Salutatio November

### SMILE PLEASE

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A well-known Piarist father, now passed away, used to claim very seriously that life only makes you smile, when necessary, but on no account could you laugh. He set himself as an example, seeing as he said he had never laughed. One of the unstated agreements between the rest of the community, on hearing this, was to creep up on him by surprise and make him laugh with some absurd trick. I think that they got him to laugh, but not to change his theory. There are reflexes not controlled by will, but your convictions are.

To speak of smiling may sound like fuss or childishness. It is to have a low opinion of smiling. On the other hand, it is never good to forget “*if you do not behave like children...*”. Why talk about smiling, amongst us? Let’s look at our faces, what our usual countenance is. Probably, without a lot of reasoning, we are starting to understand. There are philosophies, at least that’s what they are called, about everything. Not long ago I read a substantial French book -the author declared himself to be a philosopher-about siestas. I lent it to somebody interested in the topic and I never got it back. I’m sure he liked it and, perhaps, enjoyed his siesta a little bit more. Praise be to God. There are also philosophies about the human smile, and not only talking about the smile on Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa. Personally I feel incapable of making philosophy about many things, among these, smiling. I am therefore going to write down some meditations born of various experiences and some moments of observation about one’s self and the environment.

I know of one religious Institution whose rule is to smile when passing another person or having to attend someone. It is so important that they talk about “the institutional smile” (here they give it a name, just like charisma itself). Great, if it doesn’t end up as mere formalism. For to always walk around with a sulky face is no good either, or healthy. If life barely gives you enough to smile about, worries don’t have to wipe the smile away completely either. To have them is normal. If we don’t smile, in spite of that, it begins to be not quite so normal, above all if it becomes a habit.

Many a taciturn face is seen at times in the communities. Are they worried? Is it something more vital and profound? We already know that joy in the heart isn't laughter in the mouth. But, if you never laugh or smile, shouldn't we start asking questions about the heart? Because we should worry if the heart is sad. That heart is sick and something doesn't quite fit. Vocation, any vocation, when it fits well, is experienced with joy. One of the great sufferings of so many people is that they have never experienced the vocation they aspired to, or which they had always dreamed about as their own. Economic circumstances, missed opportunities, the struggle to live, a string of obstacles haven't allowed it. And the person suffers. He suffers because it is not his place and he feels obliged to live there.

Religious vocation is an option for freedom; it comes from faith. Faith is trusting fully in God. What is the matter with us if, when we are inside a religious family, perhaps after many years, joy freezes on our lips because our heart is already frozen? The situation is not a cross that the Lord tells us we have to accept and carry, following his example. I have seen -and admired, because I doubt if personally I would know how to reach the same high level- people, amongst us, who bring deep joy and endless proof inside the pain. Just being with them, getting to know them, dealing with them, is a medicine which can cure you of so much sadness and anguish that we fall into without there being so many reasons for them.

Of course joy is not a voluntary outcome. Let's laugh, because it's time to or we have been told to. May the Lord free me from ordering such things. Just to wish it whole heartedly for all the brothers, because a joyful heart is a sign of a vocation experienced fully, with devotion, bearing fruit. This is what is important above all.

Let's get back to the smile. This is the sign of benevolence which we give to each other. I have had the opportunity to travel to countries whose language I have no idea about. You feel lost, limited in your faculties, sometimes cancelled out. But here comes the smile to the rescue. To smile, to get the other person to smile, is to accept each other, to ask to be received and to see you are accepted. You rest and you feel free from tensions and fears when you encounter or are received with a smile. The first communication with children is that way: smile at them and make them smile. You don't know who is happier, them or you. I have fond memories of going into some class or other in our schools and coming face to face with a big smile on our students' faces. Obstacles seem to disappear. My head, already an old computer with reduced memory, keeps with great pleasure those snapshots of classrooms in Africa, in Japan, Latin America, Europe, always with children's smiles.

A smile transmits inner peace; it is a sign of serenity and appreciation. It is not at odds with authority nor its exercise. Respect is another thing. Why

juxtapose authority and seriousness? Respect is made more human if it is accompanied by an honest friendly smile.

A smile attracts more than severity and even punishment is made more human and acceptable. We are not going to assume moral authority just because we put on a serious face in front of the class, for example. Moral authority comes from setting an example. Sure you have know how to differentiate times and places; to know how to act properly in both. This also comes into the educational work with children and youngsters. But authority over them, authority which leaves a positive exemplary stamp for life, does not come because we have them in line and serious, without the merest hint of a smile. It comes rather from the educator setting an example.

At this moment in time, there is not a great deal of peace in the classrooms. Student indiscipline is reaching uncontrollable limits, making all instructional and educational work impossible. Proof sometimes unbearable for the educator, who does not know what to do. Educational sociology is uncovering a growing demotivation in teachers and educators whose cause seems to be found in that aggressive, even violent, classroom climate.

Let's see if the students have also lost their capacity to smile, changing it for the mocking, noisy, tasteless, aggressive sneer. If that were the case, it would also indicate that the heart is sick.

From the monk and educator smiling or not smiling, we have moved on to the student smiling or not smiling. The tasteless rude guffaw has nothing to do with the joy a smile shows. Neither does a long sad face, a surly look, an annoyed disillusioned countenance, a frown on your face. There is something wrong in one and all, adult and young. It's not the time to play at being psychologists. I accept, besides, that I know nothing of psychology, although I value and admire it. If smiles are absent, let's look inside the heart, just in case it is falling ill. We cannot go through religious vocational life with a sick heart. It's no use referring to the heart of flesh and blood, where even a transplant is possible. Love may be failing. It has been said that a smile is the caress of a heart which loves.