

Why all the Catholic Rules?

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Q: I sometimes get frustrated with the Church and all the rules about “do this” and “don’t do that.” I believe that God just wants us to be happy.

A: Thank you for writing. I really appreciate your frustration. In fact, there were many years when I experienced something similar. I saw the Catholic Church as constantly claiming to have some special insight into right and wrong, and intensely interested in telling me how to live. I was convinced of the words you wrote: “God just wants me to be happy.”

So let me begin by saying that I can understand a part of where you are coming from and what you might mean. But let’s get down to it: Does God just want me to be happy?

Actually, no. He doesn’t. At least not in the way that most people mean. But before we get to that, we have to understand our terms. What is “happiness”? What does the word mean? I mean, we have a Declaration of Independence that claims we all have a right to, among

other things, the “pursuit of happiness.” If this is such an inalienable right, I should understand what this thing I have a right to pursue actually is.

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Well, this is where we might experience a little tension. To the modern mind, “happiness” means “to feel good.” If I “feel good,” then I am happy, and if I tell you that I’m happy, you are likely to conclude that I’m telling you that I feel good. I think that we can all agree that this is typically what we mean when we use this term. Therefore, when we read something like the Declaration of Independence (or the above statement that “God just wants us to be happy”) we often translate this to “you have the right to pursue feeling good,” or “God just wants us to feel good.”

But to the great men and women of the past, “happiness” did not mean feeling good, it meant doing good or being good. This goodness was not rooted in a pleasant feeling but was rooted in the moral law. To “be happy” means to be just. It means to be honest. The original meaning of the word happy (in Greek, “*eudaimonia*”) means to have what is most desirable for flourishing. Therefore, to “be happy” means to “choose moral excellence” more than it has anything to do with feelings of well-being.

(On a related tangent, the English word “happy” comes from the word “hap,” which means “chance.” I “happen” to feel “happy”; it is a mere accidental state of feeling. There is no way to make this a permanent thing; it all comes down to chance. How do I have a “right” to pursue a chance feeling of well-being?)

But wait! I thought that God loves us! Yes. He most definitely does. But what is love? Is it mere affection without definition? Is God’s love mere permissiveness? I think that many of us would like to imagine God according to these terms. This isn’t new to us. In fact, my pal C.S. Lewis wrote about this in his book, “The Problem of Pain,” saying:

“What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, ‘What does it matter so long as they are contented?’ We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven — a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves,’ and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of the day, ‘a good time was had by all.’”

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God loves you. But the hard fact is that not everything we want is good for us. Therefore, there are things that you and I want that God does not want for us. God wants our good. It is absolutely critical that we get this right: God is “for us” (and if God is for us, who can be against?). But that means something very clearly: Everything that is an enemy of who he has

made us to be is hateful to God. God hates. God hates lies, gossip, greed, using other people, drunkenness and anything that takes us away from worship of him and love of others.

In the end, God does not just want us to be happy (in the ancient or modern sense). To “just” be happy in either sense is still too little for God. Ultimately, if there is anything that God “just” wants, it is this: God just wants us to be his.