

If Christianity is joyful, why are we so somber?

By JAMES K. HEALY

In the old seminary days, laughter was crucial to our survival, yet it always seemed "naughty." Many are the spiritual directors who hinted that a little more piety, a deeper spirituality, would have lifted us above the need for "frivolity." Ironically, that mentality often made the merely funny story seem hilarious and, if the least bit earthy, it bordered on the heretical. Like the one about the seminarian who confessed

of sex that makes so many preachers obsess about sins of the flesh while they say so little about systemic injustice and human greed?

I could never share a faith that didn't call to joy. I shout with Augustine, "We are Easter people; Alleluia is our song!" I've always loved how the deeply reflective mood in Lent and Advent yields for one Sunday to a burst of joy. Now, in today's sad and sorry world, that sacred tradition takes on new urgency. We need to rejoice. And, oh yes, to laugh. No matter how drooping our spirits, we are called to pick up the spirits of others. We are divinely called to provoke the sound of laughter.

But if joy is our message, — if "good news" is our vocation; then we've got a lot of work to do. Joy is not what a sad and sorry world is hearing from us. We make true religion seem so somber. We make piety prudish. We make holy heavy. Why? Why do we do that? Is it so hard to believe that heaven resounds with the sound of human laughter?

Should we blame the prophets? Surely Isaiah, giant among them, is no slouch when it comes to solemn and serious. Yet, Isaiah sets the stage for Jesus with the glorious words "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to bring good news to the poor ... to give those who mourn the oil of gladness." Isaiah knew well the meanness and madness of the world, but he was compelled by the spirit to be a sign and source of joy and hope.

And Mary, who would taste tragedy beyond measure, is forever present to the church in her magnificent moment of joy, salvation ready to burst forth from her sacred person: "My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God, my savior." Even as she foretells the sad fate of the proud and haughty for the terror and tragedy they inflict upon the poor and lowly, Mary calls us all to be a people of joy, a sign and cause of gladness.



"The Laughing Christ"
by Willis S. Wheatley

The apostle says, "Rejoice, I say it again, rejoice!" That's what the world needs from us, this world so sad and selfish. This is the Good News, the glad news entrusted to the church. In its most solemn seasons and saddest moments, the church must call itself, call all the people, to get hold of joy again.

We must not shut our ears to the cries of the poor but we must find every reason to be glad, to celebrate. We've got to share our laughter with the same compassion we share our tears. We must help heal the church of its heaviness, help it become a sign of joy and hope to so many steeped in sorrow.

I am certain that Mary and the apostles, the first Christians, laughed again after Jesus died. Why? Because Christians are a people of joy, a people of fun and laughter, sometimes rollicking laughter. Wherever sadness strikes, Christians lift each other's spirits, renew each other's hopes and restore each other's confidence that God gives us a joy no power in heaven or on earth can take away. ■



"impure thoughts," prompting the confessor's query: "Did you entertain them, son?" His reply: "Heck, no, father, they entertained me!"

Strange. We always claimed our faith was the ultimate source of all human joy and delight. Yet, in practice, we so often seemed ill at ease with humor and the sound of laughter. We were able to speak so easily of a holy joy quite apart from fun and fellowship; of a sacred gladness unrelated to a giggle. Why is that? Why is "true religion" made so solemn, so serious, so sad? Why, if something sounds like fun, is it already suspect? Is it the very joy

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