

## LET'S LAUGH A LITTLE<sup>1</sup>

BY DANIEL DURKEN, O.S.B.

I was forty years old before I saw my first picture of Jesus laughing. That seems a long time to wait before finding the face of Christ that so emphatically expresses an essential but oft forgotten facet of his humanity. But this was a face well worth waiting for and growing accustomed to. It appeared on a page of *Playboy* which my brother had thoughtfully sent me (*sans* centerfold) about a year ago. The illustration (by Fred Berger) went with Harvey Cox's article, "For Christ's Sake," in which Cox renounced the image of Jesus as a melancholy ascetic and called for his resurrection as a joyous revolutionary.

The artist must have first read the article and taken Cox seriously, for there was Jesus, not smiling, not grinning, not chuckling, but laughing—with head back and eyes dancing and mouth open and teeth showing. Whether he was responding naturally to one of Peter's pompous proclamations or reacting normally to the joyful puzzlement of the guests at that wedding feast in Cana when they started the first round of their last wine, it is not possible to tell. But I have been grateful that at least one artist has been bold enough to remind us that Jesus could and did see the funny side of life and even laughed about it.

In fact, I was tempted to take down the sober, somber picture of that pontiff which hangs in our rectory hallway and put up the laughing Christ. He would be the reminder and the inspiration I need to laugh a little every day.

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<sup>1</sup> THE PRIEST, May 1971.

A laugh a day might well replace the proverbial apple and keep us no less healthy and happy. Speaking of apples, maybe Adam would have been a lot better off if he had laughed at Eve and teased her a little: "Come now, my dear, you don't really expect me to believe that story of a talking snake, do you?" Why is it, incidentally, that theologians and Scripture scholars so completely miss the rib-tickling humor of so much of the Bible? While they fumble for explanations that obfuscate the ordinary man, along comes a comedian like Bob Newhart and provokes the light-hearted laughter that can be gotten from many a biblical story. Late last fall Newhart did a delightful commentary on the Noah story when he played a feed merchant taking Noah's phone order and telling his workers in the back room to pick up the extension and listen to this nut who is building that big boat in his driveway. Theologically that may not be the point at all, but pedagogically I'll bet that the story will be remembered a lot longer than all the points in a stuffy lecture on the literary genre of Genesis and its relation to the Gilgamesh epic.

I think we priests need to laugh a lot more, and we may just as well start with the sometimes subtle, often times obvious, and every time earthy humor of the Bible. For another example, try the crude joke of Genesis 31:34. There Rachel sits on her father's household gods and pleads her inability to rise from them because of her monthly period! In addition giving those pagan idols the kind of treatment they deserved, the incident proves that there are other ways of putting down male chauvinism and promoting women's lib than by carrying banners and burning bras.

Most of all, we priests need to laugh at ourselves more often. A vocation director told me a few years ago that one of the first things he looks for in priesthood candidates is a sense of humor. When he doesn't find it, when he sees humor stifled by a heavy seriousness masquerading as maturity, he puts off a prospective candidate until that person matures more and can start to realize how essential humor is to a priestly or religious vocation.

If a sense of humor is essential for entering the priesthood, it is also an important factor for staying in the priesthood. Among all the polls and surveys and questionnaires being taken

of priests today, I haven't seen any that try to measure and compare the merriment quotients of those who leave and those who stay. Perhaps that is not possible nor even significant. Yet I sometimes wonder whether men like Dubay and Kavanaugh (both so utterly humorless) would not have sold more books and done the Church and the priesthood more of a service if they had seasoned their criticisms with a little more of the salt and pepper of good humor instead of using so much garlic and acid.

Speaking from my own experience, if it were not for humor, my present assignment in an over-populated project-and-tenement parish in the Bronx would prove impossible. Living in an eighty-year-old rectory that was dubbed "Operation Fall Down" by a previous pastor can be no joke—until you make it so. And thus, the day of my arrival the new pastor gave me the tour of the rectory that is to be my home this year. Here is a faucet that doesn't work; there is a door that sticks and another that needs a new hinge; here is a radiator that makes a beautiful alarm clock, provided you want to get up at 5:30 a.m. when it starts to let off steam.

But the finest and funniest feature of our happy home was reserved 'til the end of the tour. In our house when you want to turn on the front doorbell so that it rings in the TV room, you have to go to the room that has an array of switches on the west wall. Find the switch that says "Kitchen" and turn that switch to "Off"! From that moment, Operation Fall Down became fun.

My first day of Sunday duty was a frustrating one that did not become funny until I decided to share it with my confreres. My story of that afternoon's sincere and nicely dressed gentleman—a Knight of Columbus and a member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, to be sure — needed a couple of bucks for a bus ticket back home and who even asked for a self-addressed envelope in which to return the shortterm loan, became a cause for community laughter instead of personal anger when I was assured by the oldest associate that I would never get my money back—because I hadn't stamped that envelope.

That story was just a springboard for others. There was the Oriental huckster who could not understand the questions he didn't want to answer until the pastor phoned the parishioner who was married to a Tokyo wife. Then the huckster suddenly remembered he had to see a dog about a man. And there was the rookie priest at his first assignment in a Polish parish telling a penitent that he couldn't understand Polish, only to be informed politely that the penitent had been speaking German.

But of course we have all played that delightful game of "Can You Top This?" The trouble of it is, however, that we wait until a monthly priests' senate meeting or a yearly Easter week get-together to show each other that we are still human enough to laugh. In between times we take ourselves much too seriously, keep combing and polishing our Messiah complex. As we go about bringing redemption and salvation and the fulfillment of the eschatological expectations to the saved whom we serve, we wear our mask of efficiency and formality and in the process do a very good job of playing that part of a clerical undertaker. Yet one of the best and easiest ways of proving to rectory visitors that our parlors are not the funeral variety is to fill the former with a little laughter. A home that has laughter surely has life and has it abundantly. For laughter is life spilling over.

If we priests are really and truly the servants of Jesus Christ, if we priests are absolutely convinced that our "primary duty is the proclamation of the gospel of God to all" (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, no. 4), then we had better start being happy about it. As elementary as it is, gospel still means Good News in my biblical dictionary and I have never seen anyone tell really good news to another as though he were proclaiming a national emergency or the outbreak of bubonic plague.

Our humorless times do not offer us much help to be happy, rooftop shouters of God's good news. We hear so much bad news these days that we forget what happens to people when the prophets of doom stop grumbling and the proclaimers of good news can be heard again in the land. I learned what it is like to give and receive good news a few years ago when I

gave a group of Brother candidates the news that they could leave the abbey for a home visit at Thanksgiving. To a group of young men who were ready to leap over the monastery wall after ten weeks of enclosure, that announcement was genuine, unadulterated, good news. How did they respond? Not with a yawn. Not with a non-committal "Big Deal!" They responded with hand clapping, foot stomping, and whistling. Imagine that kind of a reaction from your own congregation next Sunday after you have proclaimed to them the good news of Jesus Christ. Paddy wagons and straits jackets would be on the scene before an usher could holler: "Cool it, crowd! Father's only kidding again."

For folks like us who teach and even believe that joy is the first fruit of love — remember that list we once upon a time memorized: charity, JOY, peace . . . — laughter should not have to be as canned as it is on the "I Love Lucy" re-runs. We might just remember that the two kinds of people who laugh a lot are children and lovers. We are supposed to be a little bit of both, right? It takes the simplicity of a child and the security of a lover to give our hearts that lift and our voices that lilt we call laughter. With that lift and lilt comes the refreshment that children and lovers have a special way of sharing with those they play with and those they love.

A person needs faith to laugh, faith enough to say: "God knows better than I do what to make of the mess we're getting into or the one we're just getting out of." A person needs hope to laugh, hope enough to hang loose when we're getting up-tight, so that God can have enough room to operate and not be pushed out of the picture by our over-anxious and pelagian efforts. A person needs (you guessed it) a lot of love to laugh, because love makes a man do a lot of risky, foolish, and silly things that only seem risky, foolish, and silly to those who have let themselves go sour on life's day-by-day adventure. Since Jesus has more love than anyone else, he must surely have had an abundance of laughs. Can't you just hear his Easter morning laughter when he sees the looks on the faces of those ladies at the empty tomb? If anyone says that Jesus never laughed, then I would like that person to tell me why he chose Peter, the greatest clown of the New Testament, to be his right hand man.

Even in such a staid statement as the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* we find a mandate for mirth: "Priests will readily and joyfully gather together for recreation, remembering the Lord's own invitation to the weary apostles: 'Come awhile' (Mk. 6:31)."

The use of that last Scriptural quotation could and should trigger at least a smile, for that very quote — "Come apart into a desert place and rest awhile" — has traditionally conjured up pictures of a clean, quiet, and secluded contemplative convent. In fact, this was the very reference used by the Congregation of Religious at the beginning of its "Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns" (August 15, 1969). But the Spirit blows where he wills and provides a *sensus plenior* in the above instance. So, in place of hushed voices and softly padding feet and the angelic strains of a modified Gregorian chant, that command of Jesus to come apart and rest awhile unfolds for us to behold hardly a desert or even a deserted place, but one liberally sprinkled with melting ice cubes and scattered oases called Vat 69 and Johnny Walker (how else could we drink theologically to Vatican II and Good Pope John?) and a cluster of comrades who will eventually sing an out-of-tune but sincere "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Not even a Palestrina could make that melody sound any sweeter than when it comes from hearts full of enough humanity to laugh a little at our humanness and thereby prove that we can do the next and nicest thing to laughter, and that is to cry a little, too.

Those are the days, my friends, when we don't need a picture of Jesus laughing. Then we have his face right before us. And for Christ's sake and ours it is good to see a face like that.

"Giving of ourselves for the betterment of the less fortunate is the cheapest and most effective mental therapy available today. To deny ourselves the joy of giving is to deny our basic men. And if we deny that desire, we risk emotional death, just as a man who denies his hunger risks physical death."

JOHN CORNELIUS, *The Glory of a Gift*