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Humor, Health and Happiness

JOSEPH L. LENNON, O.P.

It is only right and fitting that all you who cooperate with God in the preservation of life on earth should gather for public worship in adoration of the Creator of all life.

The White Mass, the memorial sacrifice of Our Lord's death on the Cross, is likewise offered as a group tribute to all of you who care for the sick, that your dedication to your Christlike vocation may be renewed with the noblest of motives.

Personally, I am happy you invited me to talk to you on this occasion, because my name in religion is Luke, and St. Luke was himself a physician who for nineteen centuries has been the world-wide model for the medical profession. Moreover, it has been my privilege to serve as public representative for the past four years on the Board of Directors of Physicians' Service in Rhode Island, and as President of the Committee of Consultants to the State Board of Nursing Education. This has increased my esteem for all those connected with the art of healing.

Did you know, however, that people often charge many of you who care for the sick with being overly-serious, depressingly solemn — of lacking what is known as a sense of humor! There may be reason for this.

The science and art of healing brings the doctor and nurse into

contact with humanity under circumstances that strip away illusions and pretenses and reveal the essential character. Pain is a reality, perhaps the starkest reality we know. Given even passably good health, a man or woman can, as the saying goes, "put up a front" that the shrewdest observer can scarcely penetrate; but when one is severely stricken, pretense collapses, and the personality is revealed to the doctor and the nurse as it really is.

To see men and women as they really are is not always a happy experience. Some people are ennobled by suffering, but not all. Some are debased by it. There is a point, as the devilish ingenuity of the concentration camps has showed us, at which extreme suffering can break down any character and dehumanize the sufferer to an animal level. It is the glory of modern medical science that it can and does prevent suffering so extreme in civilized countries; but there is and there will always be enough preventable pain to give the medical worker a highly realistic view of humanity.

This can have a deadening effect. You have been told many times that yours is a noble profession. It can be, but it is not necessarily so. It all depends on the attitude that practice develops in the individual. A medical worker can see so much of evil, and weakness, and folly that

he will come to despise humanity; and there is no nobility in that. In short, some people highly competent in knowledge and skill, fall into an icy cynicism as a reaction against the physical and spiritual ugliness they find in human beings.

Yet the very same experience that dries up the milk of human kindness in one person can have the opposite effect on another. While practicing his profession the physician not only sees the bad side of human nature, but also the good side; not only the ugliness, but also the beauty of heroism in suffering. That beauty is just as real as the unloveliness of pain unsanctified and cursed. He owes it to himself to remember that beauty, to cherish it, to meditate upon it, as much and as often as he can. In so doing he will inevitably overlay and eventually become reconciled to the fact that men are not angels; and in that way he will enhance the richness and happiness of his own life; indeed, he will develop a sense of humor.

Now, humor is necessary for many reasons. We live in a vale of tears and Scripture says there is a "time to weep." But it also says there is a "time to laugh." Man is made to be happy and he cannot remain long in sorrow without being badly affected. Ella Wilcox says:

Laugh and the world laughs with you
Weep and you weep alone
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth
But has trouble enough of its own.

Dale Carnegie even tells us that a happy countenance helps to win friends and influence people; and it does. To express it in verse:

When laughing Anne trips down the street
The sun comes out as well
The town is at her twinkling feet
The crier rings his bell
The young men leap like little fish
Policemen stand and purr
While husbands look behind and wish
That they had married her.

But husbands, do not despair. If your wife is always moody and broody, and gloomy, there is something you can do about it. Here is what one husband recommends:

My darling wife was always glum
I drowned her in a cask of rum
And so made sure that she would stay
In better spirits night and day.

This is not a talk on how to be funny and therefore popular. Humor is needed for more than that. It is positively required if you want to retain your sanity amidst the stress and strain of daily life. In short, unless you develop the ability to laugh at some things, you will end up by spending your spare time cutting out paper dolls. Sound mental health is impossible without an adequately developed sense of humor. You not only must be able to laugh at the world because it is ridiculous, but be able to laugh at yourself (before others do), because you and I and every person is, in some sense, ridiculous. Indeed, it would be a good idea to pray every day:

Give me a sense of humor, Lord
Give me the grace to see a joke
To get some pleasure out of life
And pass it on to other folk.

In fact, a sense of humor is also supposed to be a great boon to physical health. As the rhymist states:

Care to our coffin adds a nail, no doubt;
And every grin so merry draws one out.

We are told for instance, that the so-called belly laugh is supposed to aid digestion. That's the meaning of the saying "Laugh and be fat." That is why fat people have the reputation of being so jolly. And so Shakespeare says through the mouth of Caesar: "Let there be men around me that are fat; sleek-headed men and such as sleep o'night. Yon Cassius hath that lean and hungry look. He thinks too much. Such men are dangerous."

Again, my medical friends tell me that cheerful people resist disease better than gloomy persons. Which only goes to show that it is the *surly* bird that catches the *germ*. Or to state it in another fashion:

Joy and temperance and repose
Slam the door on the doctor's nose.

On second thought — that is a terrible pun, isn't it — "the surly bird catches the germ." Do you know what a pun is?

A pun is the lowest form of wit
It does not tax the brain a bit.

But even if a pun is the lowest form of wit it does require some thought to grasp it. Indeed, that is the basic characteristic of humor: it is intellectual. From time immemorial man has been defined as a rational animal, and a rational animal is also a risible animal — a being who laughs. In other words, the tickle in humor is mental. That is why no one likes to admit he does not "get the point" of a joke. It implies that he's stupid. And it's true. Of course, there is some benefit in being a bonehead, too. As the rhymist says:

One thing that's pleasant about being dumb
(A state that I'm chronically in)
When anything's said that goes over my head
It doesn't get under my skin.

In any event, humor requires ability to perceive relationships, and this involves intelligence. Certainly, it takes brains to recognize the humor in the witticisms of Benjamin Franklin. As for example in the proverb:

God heals and the doctor takes the fee.

or

Where there's marriage without love
There'll be love without marriage.

Moreover, it takes a great deal of common sense to appreciate a little nonsense. As Oliver Wendell Holmes states:

A little nonsense now and then
Is relished by the best of men.

A sense of humor also helps to ward off emotional instability. The laughing individual is not a brooder. He doesn't take any of his emotions too seriously. Besides, the habit of laughter makes him more objective. He is better prepared to evaluate things sanely and correctly. Even the most solemn feelings or actions are comic when they are overdone. The person who can perceive incongruity can laugh at himself. A person who is suspicious and hostile, who has a feeling that other people have it in for him — such a person finds it difficult to be playful with others. It is only the paranoid personality who likes to be taken seriously at all times. A healthy personality keeps healthy by being able to perceive the incongruity of taking itself too seriously. He can

laugh off many a jibe and many a barbed thrust at his own pretensions.

It would be a good idea, however, to keep in mind the advice of Thomas Aquinas. He said that those who carry humor too far are nothing but clowns: whereas those who are always deadly serious are stuffed shirts and kill-joys. In my opinion, it is the religious person, above all, who should have a sense of humor. As the poet Yeats puts it:

For the good are always the merry
Save by some evil chance
And the merry love the fiddle
And the merry love to dance.

After all, are not the tidings of religion the tidings of great joy? The very word *gospel* means that. Some have gone so far as to say that a sense of humor is a gift that God gives to those who serve Him well. St. Theresa says "A saint who is sad, is a sad sort of saint." And on another occasion she said "From silly devotions and sour-faced saints, deliver us O Lord."

Faith is the basis of the religious person's sense of humor; for if humor is an appreciation of the incongruous things in life, the ability to see the absurdities and inconsistencies in what people say and do, then a religious outlook provides this insight more than others. By faith a person knows God, and knowing God he has a standard by which he gauges and measures himself and everything else. And if he examines his conscience regularly in the light of that knowledge, he unveils many inconsistencies in his own conduct and character. And he can laugh at

himself because his very self-knowledge becomes the basis of true humility.

The believer, then, views his life and his conduct through the eyes of God and in the light of eternity. His faith shows him the proper relation of all things and their harmony; and whatever preserves that harmony is admirable and whatever jars with that harmony is laughable. "The fashion of this world passeth away," says St. Paul. And only those who know this can be truly light-hearted.

Yes, faith and humor go together. Nor is faith found only when things are going well, when we are living on the "fat of the land" as it were, and everything is just the way we would like it. The poet Paul Dunbar states it in this fashion:

It's easy 'nough t' titter when de stew is
smoking hot
But hit's mighty hard to giggle when de's
nuffin in the pot.

The believer's humor is found in the oddest places, even in the face of adversity and suffering. When the martyr St. Lawrence was being slowly roasted on a gridiron and his persecutors asked him if he were now ready to deny his faith, he turned his head and said to his torturers "Turn me over, I'm done on this side." When St. Thomas More was climbing the stairs of the scaffold to be beheaded he said to the Lieutenant of the guard "Help me up my good man. Coming down I'll look after myself." Then there was the sickly saint, who, when he had the gout, thanked God it wasn't influenza, and when he had influenza thanked God it was not the

gout. Or the humor of the Irishman who says "Thanks be to God, my rheumatism is much worse today." Oh, I do not mean that you have to have a Pollyanna attitude toward adversity and suffering. A "grin-and-bear-it attitude" is sometimes out of place. Or to express it in rhyme:

If you can smile when things go wrong
and say it doesn't matter,
If you can laugh off cares and woe
and trouble makes you fatter,
If you can keep a cheerful face,
When all around are blue
Then have your head examined, Bud
There's something wrong with you.
For one thing I've arrived at
There are no ands and buts
A guy that's grinning all the time
Must be completely nuts.

Nevertheless, it is possible to be cheerful in the face of adversity and maybe it is because God demands great sacrifices from His servants that he compensates and fortifies

them with a keen sense of humor and the spirit of joy. St. Aloysius Gonzaga used to ask himself in every varying circumstance of life: "How does this look in the light of eternity?" And if everyone asked himself this question, what an infinity of laughable things he would see, what a wide, kindly smiling view of life he would acquire. Think of the countless little things during the day in your office, in your home, that fret and annoy, that tend to make you petty and irritable, how they would go down before such a question as rank weeds before a scythe. How does this look in the light of eternity? Yes, humor is needed by all of us. It should help us make the most of this life and merit most of Heaven.

[This was an address delivered by Reverend Joseph L. Lennon, O.P., Dean of Providence College at the White Mass of the Guild of St. Luke, St. Ignatius Church, Boston, Mass.]