



The Theological Necessity for Humor

In a collection of essays called “Holy Laughter”, Conrad Hyers says, “A common trait of dictators, revolutionaries, and ecclesiastical authoritarians alike is the refusal to laugh at themselves or permit others to laugh at them.”

Of course, “them” can easily mean “us.” At times we all take ourselves too seriously, forgetting to laugh at the mirror and refusing to let others see us as we are, as little children toddling toward the Kingdom. If we do not laugh at ourselves, and allow others to laugh at and with us, we tend to worship ourselves. Making fun of ourselves is like making a good confession. Letting others make fun of us is like accepting prophecy.

Many of the sayings of the Desert Fathers are pointed jokes. Did you hear the one about holy Abbot Moses? When he ran into some pilgrims who were coming to see him, the Abbot refused to act important and said of himself, “What do you want with him? The man is a fool and heretic!”

Did you hear the one about the disciple who was instructed to reward everyone who insulted him? For a period of three years, he agreed to exchange money for verbal abuse. When the three years ended, the disciple was relieved of his obligation and journeyed to Athens. When he tried to enter the city, he was greeted by an old man who immediately insulted him. The disciple burst out laughing. “Why are you laughing,” asked the old man. “Because,” the disciple replied, “for three years I have been paying for this kind of thing, and now you give it to me for nothing.”

Like the disciple in the story, we all need to act childlike, letting our laughter shine before men, even before grumpy old men. If we kill the laughter in our lives, some rough beast will rise up to fill the void. God spared Laughter (Isaac) and provided another sacrifice. The ram, a symbol of war, was burned up in Isaac’s place. Now some people in the world, and some people in the Church, would have us put Laughter back on the funeral pyre. In *The Joyful Christ*, Cal Samra says, “Humor is a balancing, disarming, and therefore peacemaking force that touches on the divine.”



Peaceful men and women have a divine sense of humor, a healing force. They have an accepting way of rejecting things. The peaceful ones can fight without hating, and therefore seldom fight. As Cal Samra says, “It is possible to wage peace with humor.”

So did you hear the one about the two Desert Fathers who wanted to have a quarrel? The two holy men decided to fight over a brick — a good symbol for land and property — but neither of them won, because in their years of praying and fasting they had forgotten how to fight. “You say the brick is yours? Okay, then you keep it.”

The best humor occurs when the supernatural Gospel is acted out in real life: a three-star general turns the other cheek; a president of a major corporation works for minimum wage; a Paris fashion designer gives up the runway to make robes for nuns. Whenever someone lives out the Gospel, it is a hilarious contradiction to what the world takes seriously. The world laughs at those who wish to be perfect. The world laughs at people like Xenia of St. Petersburg who sold everything she had and gave the money to the poor. The world laughs and calls Xenia a fool. The Church smiles and calls her a Fool for Christ, and a Saint.

As we all know, the mirror can be the funniest place in the world. You should have seen me this morning. Thirty-five years old, and I’m still learning how to shave. I had lather up my nose and in my ears, and by some amazing law of bathroom physics, there was a blob of shaving cream snug as a bug in my belly-button. Was that God’s revelation that He really does favor Christians with beards? More likely, the mess was simply a matter of my own impatience, a daily sin of believing I’m too important to live in the given moment.

In Medieval England, there was typically one person who could challenge the ruling king and live. That was the court jester, foolish enough to spout the truth instead of flattery. And in sixteenth-century Russia, Ivan the Terrible would take no criticism from anyone except Basil the Fool. Perhaps today we all need to



employ a jester, if not a Holy Fool, in our own little kingdoms.

Source: [In Communion: Web Site of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship](#)