



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## DIVINE HUMOR

When you start out in the spiritual life in an intentional way, undertaking a certain discipline of prayer, before long you are tempted to take your new discipline much too seriously. You get upset if you cannot say Morning Prayer one day as required by the rule. You begin to resent other Christians who seem to be able to get along in their spiritual lives without the disciplines that you have undertaken. You get impatient with those who do not see that the externals of our religion are as important as you know them to be. Everyone, it seems, is failing to take Christian practice seriously enough -- as seriously as you are taking it.

We all have a tendency to take ourselves too seriously -- not just in the spiritual life, but also in work, sports, achievements, marriage, games, and just about anything else that is important to us. This can keep us from enjoying what we are doing and giving ourselves to the task at hand. We worry too much about our performance, and we cannot pay attention to what we are doing.

Religion is particularly susceptible to this temptation. For if religion is not serious business, what is? Taken too seriously, a rule of life is apt to become a source not of joy but of burdensome regulations. One cannot laugh, or make fun of religious things. This is a puritan sort of existence: drab, humorless, full of guilt and prohibitions. Religion seems to be an unnatural imposition upon human nature. It is anything but fun.

Intuitively, we know that this kind of religion is wrong. We sense that it is making us less Christian (less the people we are created to be) rather than more. The falsehood of it is apparent at any number of points: religion must be a natural expression of humanity (at least, as God created it); it should get rid of guilt and not foster it; it should bring joy to life and not a heavier burden; it should free the soul for greater things spiritually rather than closing it in.

How we do what we do in the spiritual life is as important as what we do. The Pharisees did a lot of the right things, but all too often they took them too seriously and allowed what they did to separate them from God. Their deeds closed them in on themselves rather than opening them to God. For this reason, some Christians have rejected all structure to the spiritual life. They see it as Pharisaic. That leaves the Christian, however, with no systematic approach to his growth, with no organized structure to support him through the changes and chances of his life. That is throwing out the baby with the bath.

Instead we must take the harder course of learning how to use the disciplines that we have. It is not the discipline that is bad but how it is used. We must not give it an authority it does not have. It is a means to an end: no more and no less. It must help us in our relationship with God. It must lead us to depend ever more on Him in all that we do.

That is where our sense of humor comes in. When we fail to keep our discipline, our gut response (if we don't ignore it altogether) is to get angry at ourselves. We know we can do better. We know that we really can avoid eating the snack that we just ate. So we knuckle down and try harder to stick with the diet. Then we fail again. And again. And again. By this time, we are really getting upset with ourselves. Patience is gone. Our pride is asserting itself: we ought to be able to do it. But all the time, we are depending more and more on our own efforts -- and so drawing away from God. Our pride prevents us from asking His help.

The root of such seriousness is obviously pride: the desire to do all that we do out of our own power and resources, rather than out of God's grace. We are trying to build our spiritual lives on our own and not on the foundation of what God has given us. We have not learned to receive all that we need from Him. This was the Pharisees' error. They did not understand that religion is receiving, not achieving. They failed to distinguish between spiritual works and holiness. Holiness comes from God, and is received through that ongoing relationship of trust and love between man and God. Works are properly a response of thanksgiving to what God has done. And they are a necessary part of religious life. But they do not earn salva-

tion. They are not the same as holiness. They are not themselves the goal of the spiritual life.

It is terribly common for us to fail in some little thing over and over because we seek to depend ever more on ourselves rather than on God. It happens with faults (violations of the rule of life) as well as with sins. The antidote to our pride is humor: the ability to laugh at ourselves. If we are willing to see the humor in the situation, we see how ridiculous we are being when we think that we can make ourselves holy. We can see the comic incongruity to our little attempts compared to what needs to happen within us. We can then admit that it is God that saves us and not we ourselves. We can then allow Him in, to do in us that which we cannot do by ourselves. We can ask His help. We can accept our absolute insufficiency in spiritual matters.

Too often, we fail to enjoy our religion. We find ourselves unable to enjoy the ludicrous parts of our practice as being ludicrous. When something goes unavoidably wrong in the middle of Sunday worship, we should not get upset with the unseemliness of it all, but rather take the opportunity to enjoy the humor of it. It being unavoidable, we may be sure that God is not angry but amused. We should try to join Him in that amusement.

Humor is the cure for man-centered religion. Corporately as well as individually, we sometimes place the emphasis on man when it should be on God. Our community action programs, our concern for a liturgy that properly reflects our particular parish family, our desire for a strong Christian witness on the issues that face our society -- these tend to leave us with a preoccupation with ourselves. But in all our religion, God must be at the center. Humor will help us maintain His centrality even while we do what we must in the world. It will give us a certain distance from our activities. It will keep us from taking them too seriously. So we will not be tempted to confuse them with the essence of our religion. At the center will always be that relationship with God which is far deeper than any of the externals of our religion.

Sometimes we also take God too seriously. We begin to think of Him as irrationally demanding of us, always wanting of us something unpleasant and sacrificial (like fasting before Communion or saying Evening prayer when Monday Night Football is on). We think of Him as solemn and judgmental and humorless (puritans again!). We fail to do Him justice. He clearly has something of a sense of humor. The Ascension, to take but one example, has its theological significance to be sure. But it also has its humorous side. It is a Big Finish, complete with comic relief: "Why stand ye gazing up into heaven?" the angel asks the disciples. No doubt he's right (angels usually are) that they should get on with things, but having just seen Jesus ascend on high, where else would they be looking?

Or again, without a sense of humor, how could God have created a creature such as man? A featherless biped, perpetually prone to trouble, man even has the gall to blame his Creator when he messes things up. To create such a one requires not only a great imagination but also a sense of humor. Otherwise it would be simply a waste of effort.

Man, being made in the image of God, is meant to share God's humor, just as he is meant to share God's love. We are meant to share His outlook on the world, including ourselves. When we find ourselves being foolish and ridiculous, we should not get angry or self-conscious (which is implicitly blaming God for our foolishness), but rather take it as an opportunity to enjoy a good laugh at ourselves. We may be sure that God is doing likewise -- not laughing at our expense, but using humor as the means of our redemption. If we can laugh at our failures, we can let go of them, and let God redeem them. Humor is an essential element in spiritual growth.

Christian humor is not cheerfulness. Perpetual cheerfulness is impossible for most of us, and very trying to live with in another. It is not human to be always cheerful. There are times of cheerfulness, but also times of trial and dryness and pain. Cheerfulness can be an attempt to deny the reality of pain: it pretends that the pain is not there. Humor does not deny pain, but offers it up for redemption. Humor accepts the adversity, and seeks the incongruous side: then it will be ready to receive its redemption, whatever form that may take.

Unlike cheerfulness, humor is willing to look at pain honestly and directly. It is willing to laugh rather than be overcome. Out of its conviction of the power of God's redemption, it knows that there is nothing to fear in pain. Suffering did not separate Jesus from God, and since we live in Him, it cannot separate us from God either. Out of this conviction, we will be able to face pain and folly and find something to laugh at. We will be able to share it -- the pain and the humor -- with God.

Humor is needed in dealing with sin and failure, even as it is needed in dealing with success. It is the means to humility: to accept our failures as opportunities for God to come ever more powerfully into our lives, and to accept our successes as acts of God's power operating through our weakness. If pride is always a danger in the spiritual life, then humor is always needed to counteract the temptation. Then Christian life will be properly serious (salvation is after all serious business): the seriousness left to God upon Whom it all depends anyway. We will be left free of that burden, free to get on with our particular responsibilities, and free to manifest that Christian joy which comes only from a living dependence on God.

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