

Legion Humour

It is imperative that legionaries should have a well-developed sense of humour. The reasons for this are various. One is that our work is usually hard and carried on in depressing circumstances. It must be relieved by an inner joyousness, which is equivalent to a proper sense of humour.

Moreover, humour is a wonderful balancer. People often dispute in a cantankerous, wrong-headed way, magnifying difficulties and raising obstacles – until something starts them laughing. At once the situation clears; the dark angel takes his departure.

But there is a higher reason than that one. Humour not only appertains to the legionary character but to the Catholic character itself. As the Puritan movement is the opposite of Catholicism, so is the spirit of the two radically different. The note of Puritanism is that of grim repression. The note of Catholicism is that of an easy joyousness. Accordingly the Legion, which aims at the practice of an all-round Catholicism, must obviously seek to possess itself of *all* the notes of Catholicism. Incidentally, a mournful, woebegone apostle will shut doors against himself.

To be able to mix up fun with religion, it is necessary to have a real faith. Cardinal Newman has some thoughtful pages on this very subject. He argues that a weak faith requires to be bolstered up by formality, solemnity, dignity and propriety. A religion dependent on those supports cannot afford to be frivolous. Its faith at once wavers if one relaxes into merriment.

The other grand defender of the Faith, G. K. Chesterton, renders the same idea in his own priceless way: 'It is' – he says – 'the test of a good religion if you can make a joke about it.'

To add to that: we encounter in the saints a fine sense of fun and humour. For instance, take St Teresa of Avila whose Rule was one of great severity. She saw the need for seasoning this with plenty of humour. She wanted a light-hearted spirit in her novices and she set a headline as a practical joker during the recreation time. Another example is that of St Philip Neri, who is pictured to us as always up to comical pranks.

St Thomas More, Chancellor of England, that master of the intellect and heroic martyr of the Faith, emerges as in inveterate jester. To the end he was incurable at it. You will recall that when he was ascending the awkward step-ladder to the scaffold, the executioner offered him help. 'I can manage the way up,' he replied playfully, 'but I may require some assistance when I am coming down.'

Another would be St John Bosco in whom humour was as a running river. Like many another saint he was accused of eccentricity. On one occasion he was put into the custody of two canons to convey him to a mental home. Arriving there, he got out of the vehicle first and formally handed over to the heads of the institution the two high dignitaries who were with him. He explained

that they would probably be a little violent at being held – which certainly proved to be the case. All the excited expostulations of the two canons and their efforts to explain were not heeded. John Bosco, who was calmness itself throughout, finally took his leave and departed in the vehicle, leaving his former escort struggling in the hands of their captors.

Really one could go on in this vein in regard to *all* the saints. I must, however, quote one further one: It is St Francis of Assisi. You will remember that quotations from his life adorn the handbook references to the Annual Reunions. Joy was the very spirit of him. He radiated it through every gathering of which he was a part.

Not always are the biographies of the saints written in a balanced way. To the detriment of the lighter side of things, most biographers seem to think it necessary to assert the ascetic and prayerful sides of their subjects' lives. But this can do harm. Actually it is as important for the saints to set a headline of humour and light-heartedness as of the heavier virtues. Religion must be capable of appealing to every right-minded person.

It must not be thought, because we venerate Our Blessed Lady in the quality of Mother of Sorrows, that this was the only side of her life. Because equally we venerate her seven joys. It would be making a tragic mistake to imagine that she was ever gloomy or morose, a depressing influence in any company. It is most certain that the opposite was the case. Like her servants, the saints, she would be a source of happiness wherever she would be. This uplift could in some of the lighter spirits around her assume the form of extreme indulgence in humour. She herself would not be found straying into the more demonstrative paths of fun; that is laughter, boisterousness and the like. Such

would not be in keeping with her essential dignity and the general circumstances of her life. But do not think that she would not see and thoroughly enjoy the inner humour of every situation.

Here is obviously a deep mystery: the reconciling of that idea of calm and joy with the shadow of the Cross. For she lived in that shadow for thirty-four years, since the Annunciation. We might imagine that this would produce an agony of spirit which would leave her in a state of depression. Not at all. She knew she was the mother of the Saviour, the strong woman who would with her seed crush the head of the serpent and redeem Israel and the world. The joy of this thought must have been almost the bliss of Heaven, so that one might say she needed the corrective of the agony to keep her in balance. I would not think that the sorrow and the joy would drastically alternate in her, like darkness and light – though one or the other would gain ascendancy at times.

Her special characteristic was her tranquillity. This she maintained through all the anguished chapters of her life. This is not to be read as meaning only that she was stoical in the face of grief. That could be little. It might mean no more than a mere self-control. A lot of education proceeds on that line of teaching people reserve and the avoidance of any showing of emotion. Likewise, many persons possess this by nature. It could proceed from an absence of the softer qualities. It was none of these things in the case of Our Lady. She possessed all the emotions but in balance and under control, so that there was no need for her to deliberately restrain herself. In a particular way she could always be herself.

If joy and sorrow and the other opposites were not separate and distinct in her, then in what way do they

amalgamate? Here is an example in the minor order of the saints: St Lawrence, roasting on his grid-iron, must have suffered unspeakably; yet he must at the same time have rejoiced to the depths of his being at the thought that he was laying down his life for Christ. Therein, you will see an amalgamation of the extremes rather than an alternating of them. He was in the extreme of misery and yet would not for anything be rid of it! You know, too, his grim jest at the peak moment of his pain: 'You may turn me over now; I am done on that side.'

Gladness is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. It is to be noted that at Pentecost, when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, he produced in them mass manifestations which had apparently some air of the extravagant. For some onlookers declared in mockery: 'They are full of new wine.' And St Peter admitted that his followers' exclamations of joyful praise and overflowing of happiness required an explanation. He gave it, saying quaintly: 'These people are not drunk, as you suppose for it is only 9 o'clock in the morning.'

Now let us have a look at this aspect in our beloved Lord himself. Quite evidently there was nothing austere or remote or forbidding about him. If there had been, the children would not have besieged him as they did, pulling him one way and another, probably tugging his hair, so that the mothers felt it was an imposition and interfered. You know the answer they got. We can be sure that the disciples treated him in very much the same way, respectfully as is plain from their manner of addressing him, that is Rabbi, Master, Lord – and yet with complete familiarity.

Had he a sense of humour? To ask this question is an unconscious insult to him, because of course he must

have had an exquisite sense of humour. He was the perfect man, and humour is part of that perfection. In referring that quality to him, we have to make certain distinctions. He had humour in its perfection, whereas much of ours is a little out of line, verging on horseplay and crude merriment, oftentimes warped and malicious. Such would be an excrescence on true humour, a wart on its glowing face.

As I have already urged in the case of Our Lady, Our Lord's humour was not eclipsed or even shaded by his destiny. When he gathered together with his disciples at the end of a hard day, we can easily guess at the tone which would pervade them. Have a look at the kindred gatherings of legionaries and draw a line from that.

Would Our Lord ever play practical jokes? Here we have to hark back to what has already been said, namely that many such jokes are hurtful, even heartless. In such he could have no part. The element of kindness and helpfulness would have to enter into absolutely everything which he would do. The scriptures do not give us anything that would rank as a real practical joke on his part. One reason for that would be that we, reading it, would give it an undue and disproportionate place, run it to excess, and in the end create a wrong picture.

Moreover, he would not perpetrate a joke for the sole purpose of producing one. There would have to be a higher purpose as well. The humour would be there as an undertone and would sweetly and unostentatiously emerge, affording its own separate lesson.

Those provisos made, I contend that if we study intently the different episodes of the holy narrative, we cannot fail to find in many of his actions the element of the most delicate humour. May I give a number of instances.

You will recall the case of the lady taken in misconduct whom her accusers were proposing to stone (Jn 8:3-11). Knowing the mercifulness of Jesus, those accusers wanted to trap him and they referred the case to him. He did not contradict the order of the law in regard to that offence, but declared that the first stone was to be thrown by him who was without sin. And at the same time he proceeded to write the sins of each one with his finger on the ground. The plotters diagnosed correctly what he was doing and slunk away one by one. Then turning to the trembling woman, the merciful One addressed her: 'Who accuses you?' 'No one, Lord,' she replied. Then he said to her: 'Go away in peace and sin no more.'

Surely there is the most delightful admixture of humour in that episode, put as it is like a jewel in a setting of the other Christian virtues! Summon up before your mind the detail of that transaction: The righteous ones all in a panic at the possibility of their sins being made public and hurrying away while the going was good – headed (we are told) by the eldest. Wisdom, it is said, comes with grey hairs. When you reflect, you cannot help being almost convulsed by the humour of it all. That humour did not enter into it when we took up the page to read; it must have been in the episode at the time it happened. It was Our Lord's contribution to it. We simply *must* imagine him as chuckling over the expert way in which he had turned the tables on his would-be trappers.

Take another happening where no element of humour appears upon the surface. It is the case of the tribute narrated by St Matthew and St Luke (Mt 22:15-22; Lk 20:20-26). Scrutinise it carefully. The Pharisees, anxious to ensnare him, hatched out a most ingenious plan. They sent some of their tools (spies the text calls them) to Jesus

to ask his advice as to whether it was right to pay the legal tribute to Rome. If Our Lord said that they should *not* pay it, his word would be reported to the Romans and he would be in trouble in that quarter. But if he said yes, it would undermine his position with the Jews. It would be repeated everywhere that he was sympathising with the invaders and supporting their authority.

It was a clever stratagem. These who proposed the dilemma started off by telling Jesus how wise and wonderful he was. By thus flattering him they expected his words would flow freely and that he would commit himself one way or the other. See what happened. Jesus said: 'Show me the coin of the tribute.' They held up a denarius. He asked: 'Whose image and inscription does it bear?' They replied: 'Caesar's.' So he gave them their answer: 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' Hearing thus the words that have since run down through the ages as a proverb, the spies went away wondering. We might paraphrase this word 'wondering' by saying that they cleared off discomfited and bewildered.

That transaction was a very solemn one. Our Lord's mission had been in gravest danger. But now the spies are in full retreat. How would you think that the disciples re-acted? Of course they thronged around Our Lord in jubilation – the way anybody of adherents would in such circumstances. Imagining those rough fishermen, we can likewise imagine what their ejaculations would be like: St Peter: 'Oh, Chief, that shook them!' St James: 'That was a real stroke of genius; how did you ever think it out?' St Thomas: 'Our hearts were in our boots, but you turned the tables on them.' St Andrew: 'They could not get away quickly enough.' St Matthew: 'Not one

of them looked back.' St John: 'Oh, Master, you were magnificent.'

How would Jesus take all that delighted crowing? Do *not* imagine that he gave them a sermonette about their rejoicing being contrary to humility. Of course he enjoyed the affair as much as the disciples did – nay more! For was not his brilliant stroke a ray from the Holy Spirit? And was not that enthusiastic appreciation of the disciples really a praise of God?

That idea of embroiling Jesus between rival interests was a good one and worth trying twice. So his foes exploited the hostility which existed between the Jews and Herod. The gatherers of the tribute for the maintenance of the Temple came to Peter and asked if his Master was willing to pay (Mt 17:23-26). Peter referred the matter to Jesus, who put to him the question as to whether kings should claim tribute from their children or from strangers. Peter replied: 'From the strangers.' Jesus agreed and added that they, being children, were free from the tribute. But he added that it would be well not to cause trouble by a direct refusal of the claim. So he issued the amazing order: 'Peter, go to the sea and cast in a baited hook. The first fish that is caught, open its mouth; inside you will find a stater which will cover the amount of the tax for you and me.'

And so it worked out. Here again is that utterly subtle ingredient of humour which avoids both horns of the dilemma which had been cunningly presented to him, and which at the same time startlingly endorses his Messiahship.

Take yet another case. You will remember when Our Lord came walking on the stormy sea to the boat in which the apostles were hard pressed. He bade St Peter to leave the boat and come to him. In the faith and enthusiasm

of the moment, St Peter set his feet upon the waters and made good progress. But then, in our poor, weak way, he took his eyes off the Master and had a look at the weather. At once his faith and courage failed him, and down he went. 'Lord,' he shouted with what breath he had left, 'save me.' Immediately Jesus pulled him up, with a gentle admonition as to his want of faith. Then the two of them walked over the heaving waves and up into the boat. At once the tempest collapsed into a complete calm.

Surely that is an awfully funny transaction, if you think it out! There is poor old Peter dripping like a drowned rat and probably feeling like one too. Must we not also imagine all the witnesses of that affair, their tensions relaxed, as simply bursting their sides with laughter over it? It would be doing them a grave injustice to imagine them as acting to the contrary, looking on with long faces. We may be sure that for many a long day St Peter had to listen to crude jesting about his heroic feat of walking on the waters.

Are we to visualise Jesus himself as wearing a solemn countenance over it all? Of course not. He would have delivered his little exhortation as to faith with a face beaming with affection and humour. St Peter, and the others through him, had been taught a vital, many-sided lesson; the storm was suddenly stilled; the Master was with his men; pent up feelings were released and exploded into riotous happiness. In no circumstances must we permit ourselves to dehumanise Our Lord and his friends, the saints.

Neither must we let ourselves think that the only feature in that episode is the little lecture as to faith; that it excluded every other element including that of humour. No, because I have already insisted that into

everything that Our Lord would do, would enter kindness, helpfulness, wise counsel *and* humour.

It is absolutely certain that God is the author of humour, for humour is definitely one of the admirable human characteristics. It is the child of happiness and intellect. Thoroughly stupid people could have no proper sense of humour. With us, humour is the capacity to see the bright side in certain situations. But God sees such in *every* situation, for out of even the worst of circumstances he extracts a bright side. He makes heavenly profit out of everything.

The foregoing ideas have an importance, because it is essential that we should see Our Lord's life in true balance and in due perspective. It had to have naturalness for it was in part intended to be a model for us humans. So now I complete the little house, which I have tried to build for you, by putting on the roof.

The fall of darkness, which would be early in that southern land, would put a stop to the outdoor activities of Our Lord's mission. For large-scale artificial lighting was not available. Therefore the Master and his disciples would have to rest from the missionary labours of the day. They would spend the evening together – not in formal religious exercises but in happy relaxation. The events of the day would be discussed, including the lighter side. Stories would be told and there would be music and song. It is certain that spirits would be high and that the special note would be joy. Our Lord would not be foremost in the more uproarious amusement, but neither would he be a wet blanket on it. No look of his would signify a disapproval of their innocent tactics. In fact, he would be the opposite of repressive. If they glanced at him occasionally to gauge his reactions, they would meet the

gentle smile which showed that he was fully attuned to their mood.

At the end he would, as any leader would, give them a little talk to strengthen them for the morrow.