

Laughter As Faith



In our novitiate, when I was a novice with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, our assistant Novice Director, a sincere but overly-stern man, cautioned us about too much levity in our lives by telling us that there is no recorded incident in scripture of Jesus ever laughing. I was a pious novice but, even then, that didn't sit well with me. I combed the Gospels trying to prove him wrong, but found out that, technically, he is right. But is he?

A couple of years later, during my seminary studies, I read a book by Peter Berger entitled, *A Rumor of Angels*, in which he tries to point to various places within our everyday experience where, he submits, we have intimations of the divine, rumors of angels, hints that ordinary experience contains more than just the ordinary, that God is there.

One such experience, he submits, is that of a mother comforting a frightened child at night, using soothing words and gestures to assure the child that he or she need not be afraid that everything is all right, the world is in order. In saying those words, if she means them, and normally she does, the mother is, in effect, implicitly praying the creed.

Another such intimation of the divine within ordinary experience, Berger suggests, is the phenomenon of laughter. In laughter, he submits, we intuit our transcendence: Given that we are able to laugh in any situation shows that there is something in us that is above that situation, transcendent to it. In laughter, Berger believes, we have a rumor of angels.

Karl Rahner agrees, suggesting that laughter shows we are on good terms with reality and hence with God. Laughter praises God because it foretells our final state in heaven when we will be in an exuberance of joy. Commenting on the Beatitudes in Luke's Gospel where Jesus says, blessed are you who are now weeping, for you shall laugh, Rahner says that what Jesus is saying suggests that the happiness of the final state will not just dry away our tears and bring us to peace, it will also bring us to laughter - "to an intoxication of joy". Here are his words: "'But you shall laugh.' Thus it is written. And because God's Word also has recourse to human words in order to express what shall one day be when all shall have been - that is why a mystery of eternity also lies hidden, but real, in everyday life; that is why the laughter of daily life announces and shows that one is on good terms with reality, even in advance of all that all-powerful and eternal consent in which the saved will one day say their amen to everything that he has done and allowed to happen. Laughter is praise of God because it foretells the eternal praise of God at the end of time, when those who must weep here on earth shall laugh."

But is this superficial? Human optimism substituting itself for hope? An upbeat-spirit masquerading as theology? The naive claim that if I am happy than God is on my side? Indeed, in the Gospels, where is there a recorded incident of Jesus laughing?

Good scripture scholarship has long suggested that looking for an individual text to prove or disprove a certain point is not a good approach to scripture. The teachings of scripture are best gleaned by looking to scripture as a whole. And if we do that in this case, I believe, we will find that both Peter Berger and Karl Rahner are right. As Rahner points out, Jesus, himself, teaches that laughter will be part of the final state in heaven. You shall laugh! But, beyond that, Jesus' message as a whole invites us of joy, a joy that no one can take from us, and laughter is the exuberant expression of that joy. It is the height, the apex, the crowning jewel, of our final state in heaven.

Hence, in laughter we do have a rumor of angels and we do intuit our transcendence. In laughter we do manifest that we are on good terms with reality, and on good terms with God. In laughter we affirm, loud, joyously, and to the world, the great mantra of Julian of Norwich that, in the end, all will be well, and all will be well, and every manner of being will be well - even though our world is not in that state today

My assistant Novice Director was a wonderful, sincere, gentle, and overly serious man. Levity was not his thing and laughter was not his preferred method of implicitly praying the creed. He showed his deep faith in other ways, believing that laughter is not the only rumor of angels inside of ordinary life.

But it is one of intimation of the divine within human life. Laughter, when it is healthy, when it is not forced or cynical, is, as Rahner says, "an intoxication of joy", the joy of our final state. Thus when we laugh we also pray the creed.

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