



Joy and Laughter in the Vincentian Family Yesterday and Today

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Abstract

This article explores the often-overlooked theme of joy and laughter in Christian spirituality, with special attention to the life and legacy of Saint Vincent de Paul. While many early Church Fathers and religious founders warned against excessive laughter, viewing it as a threat to holiness and discipline, others—including Thomas Aquinas and various saints—recognized the human and spiritual value of humor. Within the Vincentian tradition, Vincent de Paul is often remembered for his gentleness, warmth, and ironic wit, even though he personally struggled with a melancholic temperament. Through anecdotes, letters, and conferences, the article highlights Vincent's encouragement of "holy joy" among the Daughters of Charity, the Confraternities, and Louise de Marillac. His light-hearted tone, engaging storytelling, and humorous gestures made him both approachable and effective. The article concludes by affirming the vital role of joy and laughter in the Vincentian Family today, as a sign of humility, humanity, and hope in service to the poor.

Cet article explore le thème souvent négligé de la joie et du rire dans la spiritualité chrétienne, en accordant une attention particulière à la vie et à l'héritage de saint Vincent de Paul. Alors que de nombreux Pères de l'Église et fondateurs religieux ont mis en garde contre le rire excessif, le considérant comme une menace pour la sainteté et la discipline, d'autres, dont Thomas d'Aquin et divers saints, ont reconnu la valeur humaine et spirituelle de l'humour. Dans la tradition vinentienne, Vincent de Paul est souvent rappelé pour sa douceur, sa chaleur et son humour ironique, même s'il était personnellement en proie à un tempérament mélancolique. À travers des anecdotes, des lettres et des conférences, l'article met en lumière l'encouragement de Vincent à la « sainte joie » parmi les Filles de la Charité, les Confraternités et Louise de Marillac. Son ton léger, ses récits captivants et ses gestes humoristiques le rendaient à la fois accessible et efficace. L'article conclut en affirmant le rôle essentiel de la joie et du rire dans la Famille Vincentienne aujourd'hui, comme signe d'humilité, d'humanité et d'espoir au service des pauvres.

Este artículo explora el tema, a menudo pasado por alto, de la alegría y la risa en la espiritualidad cristiana, prestando especial atención a la vida y el legado de San Vicente de Paúl. Mientras que muchos de los primeros Padres de la Iglesia y fundadores religiosos advertían contra la risa excesiva, considerándola una amenaza para la santidad y la disciplina, otros —entre ellos Tomás de Aquino y varios santos— reconocieron el valor humano y espiritual del humor. Dentro de la tradición vicenciana, San Vicente de Paúl es recordado a menudo por su dulzura, calidez y humor irónico, a pesar de que personalmente luchó contra un temperamento melancólico. A través de anécdotas, cartas y conferencias, el artículo destaca el fomento de la «santa alegría» por parte de San Vicente entre las Hijas de la Caridad, las Cofradías y Luisa de Marillac. Su tono alegre, su forma de contar historias y sus gestos humorísticos le hacían accesible y eficaz. El artículo concluye afirmando el papel fundamental de la alegría y la risa en la Familia Vicentina actual, como signo de humildad, humanidad y esperanza al servicio de los pobres.



Keywords: Joy, Laughter, Vincentian family, Vincent de Paul

Saints come in wondrous variety. Some are courageous martyrs, laying down their lives for the Lord. Others are stark ascetics, fleeing to the desert for lives of penance and self-denial. Others are peaceful contemplatives, “praying always and never losing heart.” Still others are selfless servants, dedicating their lives to the impoverished and marginalized.

Their states of life differ too: lay women and men, priests, brothers, sisters. Some saints are celibate; some, married. Some are peasant farmers; some, popes. They come from remarkably diverse races, cultures, and nations.

But within this enormous array, all, at least on the deepest level, radiate joy. Some laugh heartily too. A saying often attributed to Francis de Sales,¹ puts it succinctly, “A sad saint would be a sorry saint.”

Hesitations about Laughter in the History of Spirituality

It may seem strange to modern readers that, in the history of spirituality, laughter has received mixed reviews, many of which have been negative. Doesn't common sense tell us how important it is to relax and have a good laugh from time to time? But writers of important Rules and founders of religious communities have often issued strong warnings against excessive laughter.

Clement of Alexandria (150-215), one of the first Christian theologians to treat the topic, urged his readers to restrain laughter. He stated that reason ought to dominate emotion and felt that laughter disturbed a calm reasoning process. He taught that smiling, too, had to be bridled:

Even laughter must be kept in check; for when given vent to in the right manner it indicates orderliness, but when it issues differently it shows a want of restraint. ... as rational beings, we are to regulate ourselves suitably, harmoniously relaxing the austerity and over-tension of our serious pursuits, not inharmoniously breaking them up altogether. For the seemly relaxation of the countenance in a harmonious manner – as of a musical instrument – is called a smile. So also is laughter on the face of well-regulated men termed. But the discordant relaxation of countenance in the case of women is called a giggle and is meretricious laughter; in the case of men, a guffaw, and is savage and insulting laughter. “A fool raises his voice in laughter” (Sirach 21:20).²

Many early church leaders inveighed against excessive laughter. Ambrose, Jerome, Basil, and John Chrysostom — who insisted that Jesus never laughed — considered laughter as the doorway to lust. Laughter, they said, was centered in the body, polluted the soul, and crowded out the word of God. Women who laughed were judged more harshly than men! Their laughter was regarded as flirtatious.³

¹ While catchy and widely quoted, this saying is nowhere to be found in the writings of Francis de Sales.

² Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, Book 2, chapter V, “On Laughter.”

³ From Confucianism's strict code of female modesty in ancient China to the Victorian ideal of refined women, there has long been an emphasis on how women should embody restraint. Laughter, in some cultures, was linked to pleasure and even sexuality, as is implied in the citation from Chrysostom above.

Commenting on Hebrews 9:14, John Chrysostom wrote:

Do ye not hear Paul saying, Let filthiness and foolish talking and jesting (Ephesians 5:4) be put away from you? He places jesting along with filthiness, and do you laugh? What is foolish talking? That which has nothing profitable. And do you, a solitary, laugh at all and relax your countenance? thou that art crucified? thou that art a mourner? Tell me, do you laugh? Where do you hear of Christ doing this? Nowhere: but that He was oftentimes sad indeed. For even when He looked on Jerusalem, He wept; and when He thought on the Traitor He was troubled; and when He was about to raise Lazarus, He wept; and do you laugh? ... Do you not hear Christ saying, Woe to them that laugh, for they shall weep? (Luke 6:25)⁴

For centuries, the common teaching in philosophical and theological circles was that excessive laughter was a sign of a weak and undisciplined character. It undermined human dignity.

The Rule of St. Benedict laid the groundwork for caution about laughter in religious communities. Its fourth chapter warned against “excessive laughter.” Its seventh chapter, treating humility, stated:

The tenth step in humility is that he be not easily and quickly moved to laughter, because it is written: “The fool lifts up his voice in laughter.”

The eleventh step in humility is that when a monk speaks he speak few and reasonable words, calmly and without laughter, humbly and with gravity; and be not noisy in speech, as it is written: “A wise man is known by the fewness of his words.”

Founders of numerous other religious communities followed suit. St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, under the heading “To make the Exercises better and to find better what we desire,” urged retreatants: “Not to laugh and not to say anything provocative of laughter.”⁵

But interestingly, two centuries earlier, Thomas Aquinas expressed a much milder view about the place of laughter in life. He viewed play and contemplation as related. For Aquinas, the contemplation of wisdom is enjoyable, as is play, because “play has no purpose beyond itself.”⁶ In a classical study on play and culture, entitled *Homo Ludens* (Man at Play),⁷ Johan Huizinga examined Aquinas’ teaching and then observed that – sad to say – with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, play no longer held an important place in western civilization’s overly serious running of the world.

Some well-known funny Saints

⁴ John Chrysostom, On Hebrews 9:14. Cf. [John Chrysostom on Hebrews 9:14 - Catena Bible & Commentaries](#)

⁵ *Spiritual Exercises*, 8th Addition. The saying “Laugh and Grow Strong” is often attributed to St. Ignatius but is nowhere to be found in his writings.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *An Exposition of the ‘On the Hebdomads’ of Boethius*, trans. Janice L. Schultz and Edward A. Synan (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2001).

⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* ([Routledge & Kegan Paul](#): London, 1949).

Some saints knew how to laugh heartily. Their contemporaries admired them for their sense of humor.

St. Thomas More (1477-1535), who served as Lord Chancellor of England (basically, its Prime Minister), was famous as a humanist. He wrote *Utopia*, a book that was applauded throughout Europe. More was renowned for his droll humor. King Henry VIII, because of More's opposition to the king's divorce, had him beheaded. An account of his execution described it as follows:

The scaffold had been awkwardly erected and shook as he placed his foot upon the ladder. 'See me safe up,' he said to the friend accompanying him. 'For my coming down, I can shift for myself.' He began to speak to the people, but the sheriff begged him not to proceed, and he contented himself with asking for their prayers, and desiring them to bear witness for him that he died in the faith of the holy Catholic Church, and a faithful servant of God and the King. He then repeated the Miserere psalm on his knees; and when he had ended and had risen, the executioner, with an emotion which promised ill for the manner in which his part in the tragedy would be accomplished, begged his forgiveness. More kissed him. 'Thou art to do me the greatest benefit that I can receive,' he said. 'Pluck up thy spirit, man, and be not afraid to do thine office. My neck is very short. Take heed therefore that thou strike not awry for saving of thine honesty.' The executioner offered to tie his eyes. 'I will cover them myself,' he said; and binding them in a cloth which he had brought with him, he knelt and laid his head upon the block. The fatal stroke was about to fall, when he signed for a moment's delay while he moved aside his beard. 'Pity that it should be cut,' he murmured; 'it has not committed treason.' With those strange words, the strangest perhaps ever uttered at such a time, the lips famous in Europe for eloquence and wisdom closed for ever.

Phillip Neri (1515-1595) is probably the saint who is best known for being funny. The German poet Goethe called him "the humorous saint." In his serious moments, he was deeply involved in reforming a corrupt papacy and an indifferent Roman clergy. But Phillip also frequently mocked himself and occasionally others. He was enormously popular in his own lifetime. Many of his contemporaries venerated him as a living saint.

Many other well-known saints were good-humored and often quite funny. High on the list stand Don Bosco and Pope John XXIII. A saying is often attributed to St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582): "From silly devotions and from sour-faced saints, good Lord, deliver us."

Most would not ordinarily think of Vincent de Paul as funny, but Henri Bremond, the great French historian of religion, described the fourteen volumes of Vincent's Correspondence, Conferences, and Documents as "rich in teaching, sparkling with humor, and without a single banal line - a unique thing in a collection of this kind."⁸

By all accounts, Vincent was quite engaging. He was known for his *douceur*, a word that we might translate as "gentle," "charming," "attractive," or "warm."⁹ His biographers speak of his tone of voice, his transparency, his use of anecdotes, his gift for

⁸ Henri Bremond. *A Literary History of Religious Thought from the Wars of Religion Down to our Own Times*, trans. K. L. Montgomery, 10 vols. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York: Macmillan Co. • 1936), vol. 01: *The Triumph of Mysticism*, p.212

⁹ Cf. Maloney, Robert P. C.M., "A Further Look at "Gentleness"," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 39 (1995): No. 4, Article

storytelling, his gestures, and his humor. Still, relatively little has been written about Vincent's joy and laughter.

Joy and Laughter in Vincent de Paul¹⁰

Vincent's hesitations about laughter

Vincent encouraged joy and relaxation but, like Ignatius of Loyola, warned against excessive laughter. In 1657, he told the Daughters of Charity: "It's good to have some relaxation, but modestly, avoiding excessive laughter and unmannerly gestures."¹¹ In a draft of the Daughters' *Common Rules*, he wrote, "They will refrain from – among other things – frivolity, unbecoming gestures, and excessive laughter."¹² On these occasions, Vincent was focusing on was modesty.

In 1658, when he published the *Common Rules* of the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission, he wrote: *During recreation, and in other everyday matters, we should aim at not letting good humor get out of control, mixing the useful with the agreeable. In this way, we give good example to all.*¹³

His description of himself

Abelly, Vincent's first biographer, tells us that, as a young man, Vincent *sometimes showed a bilious and melancholic temperament* which obliged him to beg God earnestly to change this curt and forbidding disposition for a meek and benign one.¹⁴

Vincent himself attested to this. On March 28, 1659, a year and a half before his death, he confessed in front of the community: *I lose my temper, I change, I complain, I find fault ... at other times I am very brusque with some [people] and speak loudly and harshly ... other, boorish persons like me, present themselves with a stern, gloomy or forbidding expression.*¹⁵ With even greater humility, he stated: *I remain dry as a bramble bush.*¹⁶ He requested the community's prayers: *Because an old man rarely abandons his*

¹⁰ For their writings on this topic and many others, I am indebted to two confreres especially: first to Fr. Bernard Koch, most of whose writings, though they contain rich research, remain unpublished (but to which I have access); second, Fr. Antonino Orcajo, whose article in the online Vincentian Encyclopedia is excellent (<http://famvin.org/wiki/Happiness/Joy>).

¹¹ CCD:X:306. All the references to the writings of Vincent de Paul are taken from:

VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translators: Helen Marie Law, DC (Vol. 1), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 1-14), James King, CM (Vol. 1-2), Francis Germovnik, CM (Vol. 1-8, 13a-13b [Latin]), Esther Cavanagh, DC (Vol. 2), Ann Mary Dougherty, DC (Vol. 12); Evelyne Franc, DC (Vol. 13a-13b), Thomas Davitt, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Glennon E. Figge, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), John G. Nugent, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Andrew Spellman, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); edited: Jacqueline Kilar, DC (Vol. 1-2), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 2-14), Julia Denton, DC [editor-in-chief] (Vol. 3-10, 13a-13b), Paule Freeburg, DC (Vol. 3), Mirian Hamway, DC (Vol. 3), Elinor Hartman, DC (Vol. 4-10, 13a-13b), Ellen Van Zandt, DC (Vol. 9-13b), Ann Mary Dougherty (Vol. 11, 12 and 14); annotated: John W. Carven, CM (Vol. 1-14); New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014.

¹² CCD: XIIIb:154.

¹³ Common Rules VIII:7.

¹⁴ Abelly, III:163. Cf. Louis ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul: Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, 3 volumes, edited by John E. Rybolt, CM, translated by William Quinn, FSC, notes by Edward R. Udovic, CM and John E. Rybolt, CM, introduction by Stafford Poole, CM (New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993).

¹⁵ CCD:XII:154, 155, 156.

¹⁶ CCD:XI:54.

*bad habits, please put up with me and don't tire of asking Our Lord to change and pardon me.*¹⁷

But, contrary to his protestations, those who knew Vincent well regarded him as among the gentlest people they had ever met – warm, welcoming, and good-humored. Abelly stated that Vincent had enormous admiration for Francis de Sales, whom he considered the gentlest person he had ever known. He added that Vincent profited so well from the example of the Bishop of Geneva that he acquired a remarkable *douceur* and affability and had a wonderful way of speaking and relating with all different kinds of persons.¹⁸ In fact, he learned the lesson of *douceur* so well that he was often compared with Francis de Sales in that regard. Collet, a later biographer, observed that Vincent's gentleness and affability became proverbial and that people said the same things about him that he himself said about Francis.¹⁹

His exhortations to Louise de Marillac

Over the years, Vincent often counseled Louise de Marillac to lighten up when she was overwhelmed by feelings of sadness about her personal situation, especially when she worried about Michael, her son. He encouraged her to “*honor the holy cheerfulness of Our Lord and that of his holy Mother.*”²⁰ His letters to Louise often concluded with phrases focused on joy, such as “it is His good pleasure that we remain always in the holy joy of His love”²¹ and “live peacefully in this assurance, even, I say, in the joy of a heart that desires to conform itself completely to that of Our Lord.”²² He commanded her: “I am ordering you, moreover, to procure for yourself the holy joy of your heart by all the relaxation you can possibly take.”²³ On the brighter side, he exhorted her: “May Jesus Christ, Who is our joy in heaven and our life, be with you forever!”²⁴

He clearly thought that Louise was too serious and, at times, too sad. As she was about to set off on a journey with the ebullient Madame Goussault, he wrote to her: “I beg Our Lord to bless your trip and you yourself, and to multiply His blessings on your soul and that of Madame Goussault. Please be very cheerful with her, even though you should have to lessen a bit that somewhat serious disposition which nature has bestowed on you and which grace is tempering by the mercy of God.”²⁵ Madame Goussault, who loved Vincent and Louise deeply, was a remarkably joyful woman. Her description of her efforts to teach a young woman how to read better illustrate her good humor: “I tried to teach Catherine how to read well and to enunciate properly. She would give answers and use language that made us laugh until we cried.”²⁶ During a journey, she once wrote to Vincent: “Three things please the people here: I do not play the role of the reformer, I laugh heartily, and I go to my parish church.”²⁷

¹⁷ CCD:XII:160.

¹⁸ Abelly, Book III, chapter 12, 180.

¹⁹ Pierre Collet, *La Vie de St. Vincent de Paul* (Nancy: A. Leseure, 1748) Tome I, book 2, 99.

²⁰ CCD:I:309; cf. I:36, 69, 145, etc.

²¹ CCD:I:36.

²² CCD:I:69.

²³ CCD:I:145.

²⁴ CCD:I:355.

²⁵ CCD:I:492.

²⁶ CCD:I:194.

²⁷ CCD:I:196.

His advice to the Daughters of Charity

Vincent was utterly convinced, and often stated, that the Daughters were giving joy to God. He introduced this theme on July 31, 1634, during the earliest extant conference to the sisters.²⁸ It recurred over the years like a leitmotif when he spoke with the sisters. He encouraged them to show their joy as they served their patients: “When you're serving the patients, be sure a certain joy is visible on your face to let them see that you really take pleasure in serving them and are glad to listen to them.”²⁹ He did not hide his own feelings about the Daughters. He told them: “I repeat, Sisters, that when I meet you in the streets, with your basket on your back, I experience inexpressible joy.”³⁰

Vincent could laugh with the sisters, but apparently the sisters' leadership team did not always catch Vincent's attempts to lighten things up. At a meeting of their General Council on June 20, 1647, he commented: “I said this, Sisters, to inject a little humor into our meeting ...”³¹

He wrote to Sr. Jeanne Lepeintre on February 23, 1650: “I approve of your tact in giving a little liberty to our Sisters to laugh and talk when the occasion presents itself ... You need a little relaxation from your constant work.”³²

His advice to the Confraternities of Charity

Vincent was utterly convinced that the Confraternities, like the Daughters,³³ should render their service to the most abandoned with joy. In 1617, in the first Rule of the Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon-les-Dombes, he wrote: *When the person whose turn it is has received from the Treasurer whatever is needed on her day for the food of the poor persons, she will prepare the dinner and take it to the patients, greeting them cheerfully and kindly.*³⁴ He repeated the same advice in many later Rules.

His irony and sense of humor

Vincent could be quite ironic. Surely, some who witnessed or heard of the following events, must have laughed and said: “What a wily old man he was!”

When a priest of the Congregation asked permission to leave the community so that he could help his elderly father, Vincent responded: *Your father ... is only forty or forty-five years of age at the most, enjoying good health, able to work and ... is, in fact, working. Otherwise, he would not have remarried, as he has done recently, to a young woman eighteen years of age, who is one of the most beautiful girls in town. He himself informed me of this.*³⁵

When a religious spoke with him about his desire to become a bishop, Vincent stated: *What a wrong you would be doing to your holy Order in depriving it of one of its main pillars, who sustains it and gives it a good name by his teaching and example ...*

²⁸ CCD:IX:5.

²⁹ CCD:X:392.

³⁰ CCD:IX:68.

³¹ CCD:XIIIb:284.

³² CCD:III:604.

³³ CCD:IX:466.

³⁴ CCD:XIIIb:12-13.

³⁵ CCD:II:611.

*you still have greater service to render to God and to your Order, which is one of the holiest and most edifying in the Church of Jesus Christ.*³⁶

On September 11, 1654, in a light-hearted tone, Vincent responded to Charles Ozenne, the superior in Warsaw and calmed him and the other members of the local community who feared an approaching eclipse: *I do [not] think that the experts in astrology are disturbed by it, and even less those who are instructed in the school of Jesus Christ, who know that the wise man will rule the stars.*³⁷

On another occasion, a priest stormed into Vincent's room to inform him of his firm decision to leave the Congregation as soon as possible: *M. Vincent began to smile and looking at him with great kindness and tenderness said, "When do you plan to leave? Are you going on foot or will you take a horse?"*³⁸ Abelly stated that *the priest was so surprised by this response that Monsieur Vincent had given to distract him from this temptation, when he expected some sort of severe reprimand, that he was completely freed from this wish to leave.*³⁹

His listeners recognized the light-hearted inflection in Vincent's voice when he was imitating lazy members of the community, as well as the gestures he made when mimicking those *who seek only to enjoy themselves and, provided they have enough to eat, don't bother about anything else.*⁴⁰ In his conference of December 6, 1658, the note-taker highlighted his gestures: *In saying this he made certain gestures with his hands, moving his head around and speaking in a certain contemptuous tone of voice, which conveyed even better what he was trying to express than what he was actually saying.*⁴¹ Such gestures were common in Vincent's oratorical style. It helped keep his listeners interested, at times causing them to laugh, and at other times creating a sense of remorse or repentance. Brother Ducournau, the usual note-taker during his conferences, commented: *each individual is very attentive when he speaks, many are delighted to listen to him, and those who are absent often ask what he said, expressing their regret at not having been present for it.*⁴²

In a fascinating article entitled "Humanness in a Saint," Fr. Thomas Davitt narrates a series of episodes in Vincent's life that biographers rarely highlight and that bring some of the funny inconsistencies in his humanity to the fore.⁴³ Vincent, who was quite self-aware, must have laughed at times at his own foibles.

³⁶ CCD:IV:21.

³⁷ CCD:V:182-183. *Sapiens dominabitur astris* is a [Latin](#) phrase meaning "The wise one will rule through the stars," but it was popularly taken to mean "The wise one will rule the stars." It was used in astrology, theology, philosophy, and literature from the late 13th to the late 17th century.

³⁸ CCD:XII:393.

³⁹ Abelly III:152.

⁴⁰ CCD:XII:81.

⁴¹ CCD:XII:82.

⁴² CCD:XI:xxix.

⁴³ Davitt, Thomas C.M., "Humanness in a Saint," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 1 (1985) Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol6/iss1/1>

The Importance of Joy and Laughter Today

Despite the historical cautions described above, let me suggest how important joy and laughter are in a healthy spirituality, both for individuals and for our Vincentian Family.⁴⁴

A philosophical/theological perspective

Here, I offer the thoughts of three outstanding modern figures who have influenced contemporary Catholic thinking significantly.⁴⁵

1. Karl Rahner (1904-1984)

Many regard Rahner as the most influential Catholic theologian of the twentieth century. The twenty-three volumes of his *Theological Investigations* are filled with creative insights into a wide spectrum of topics. His articles are often heavy, their tone is serious, and their style is complicated. One would hardly call Rahner, as Shakespeare did Yorick, “a fellow of infinite jest.”⁴⁶ But he left an intriguing article on laughter which some regard as his best.⁴⁷

The “comical and the ridiculous should be laughed at,” Rahner counsels, cautioning that “the only one who can do this is the person who does not adapt everything to himself, the one who is free from self, and who like Christ can ‘sympathize’ with everything; the one who possesses that mysterious sympathy with each and every thing, and before whom each can get a chance to have his say. But only the person who loves has this sympathy.” The kind of laughter of which Rahner speaks “lets a human being be a loving person,” someone who is “not anxious about his dignity.”

This type of person is capable not only of laughing but is able, Rahner notes, to venture the loss of self-composure that laughing can bring about and risk being seen as superficial, since “laughter almost always borders on the trivial.”

“The laughter of daily life announces and shows that one is on good terms with reality, even in advance of that all-powerful and eternal consent in which the saved will one day say their ‘Amen’ to everything that [one] has done and allowed to happen.”

⁴⁴ I am convinced that this is true not just for individuals but also for communities. *The Practical Guide for the Local Superior*, published for the Congregation of the Mission in 2003, stated without hesitation: “Communities where laughter and good humor do not exist will surely be sad communities.” Cf. *Vincentiana* 47, #4 (July – August 2003), p. 33. It warned against dour superiors (article 107-198).

⁴⁵ All of them were or are Jesuits!

⁴⁶ Cf. *Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 1: “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.” Clown have played a significant role in many cultures and eras, as have jesters. St. Vincent would surely have known of and probably have had contact with Mathurine de Vallois, also known as Mathurine la Folle (‘Mathurine the Fool’), who was a French jester at the court of Kings Henry III, Henry IV, and Louis XIII successively. Jesters were often permitted to speak truths that others could not. In the introduction to his book *Clowning in Rome*: (Doubleday, 1979), Henri Nouwen made the interesting statement: “The clowns remind us with a tear and a smile that we are sharing the same human weakness. The longer I was in Rome, the more I enjoyed the clowns, those peripheral people who by their humble, saintly lives evoke a smile and awaken hope, even in a city terrorized by kidnapping and street violence.”

⁴⁷ Cf. *The Content of Faith* (Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt, eds.; Harvey G. Egan, translation ed., Crossroad, 1994), on pages 148-152. Interestingly, Karl Rahner’s brother Hugo, also a Jesuit, wrote a popular book on a similar theme. Cf. Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967). Cf. also James Martin, S.J., *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life* (HarperOne, 2012).

Laughing is part of the art of existence. It is an exercise of our freedom. "Real laughter," writes Rahner, "resounding laughter, the kind that makes a person double over and slap his thigh, the kind that brings tears to the eyes; the laughter that accompanies spicy jokes, the laughter that reflects the fact that a human being is no doubt somewhat childlike and childish."

Rahner suggests that genuine humor is the expression of genuine love for another while forgetting about oneself. He states:

Not everybody, however, has a genuine sense of humor. That calls for an altruistic detachment from oneself and a mysterious sympathy with others which is felt even before they open their mouths. Only the person who has also a gift for affection can have a true sense of humor. A good laugh is a sign of love; it may be said to give us a glimpse of, or a first lesson in, the love that God bears for every one of us."

2. Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988)

For some, von Balthasar is the antithesis of Rahner. While he and Rahner were contemporaries and while both became Jesuits, their lives took different turns. Von Balthasar left the Jesuits in 1950 to accompany the Community of Saint John, a secular institute that he was organizing with Adrienne von Speyr, a Swiss Catholic convert, physician, mother, mystic, and author of numerous books on spirituality and theology. While Rahner offered a progressive, accommodating position on modernity, von Balthasar resisted some of modernity's human focus and emphasized that Christianity needed to be more challenging toward modern trends.

But these two prominent theologians were of one accord in emphasizing the importance of good humor and laughter. Both wrote important essays on the topic. His essay on "The Humor of the Saints" is part of his popular book, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, where von Balthasar states: "The saints are never the kind of killjoy spinster aunts who go in for faultfinding and lack all sense of humor ... For humor is a mysterious but unmistakable charism inseparable from Catholic faith, and neither the "progressives" nor the "integralists" seem to possess it - the latter even less than the former."⁴⁸

He highlights the negative influence of an ill-humored Jansenism on Catholic spirituality, particularly in France. He maintains that, contrary to Jansenism's rigidity, Catholic spirituality is pliable and flexible. He cites Chesterton, who states that "only the Catholic form guarantees the miraculous quality of being, the freedom, the sense of being a child, of adventure, the resilient, energizing paradox of existence."⁴⁹

While declaring that a good book on the humor of the saints still needs to be written, von Balthasar rapidly lists many saints, ancient and modern, who knew how to laugh. He focuses particularly on his contemporaries Charles Péguy and C.S. Lewis.

He suggests, rather subtly, that the papacy, even while called to be uncompromising in what pertains to the heart of Christianity, is best served most of the time by "the occasional light touch of the helmsman's hand."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007) p. 226.

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, 227.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, 229.

3. Pope Francis (1936-2025)

Francis has continually emphasized joy. His Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* focused exclusively on the topic.⁵¹ He has returned to the theme again and again.

In a recent article published in the *New York Times*, Pope Francis highlighted the importance of faith and humor in everyday life.⁵² In his writings and talks, the Pope has often reflected on how humor, far from being a mere distraction, can be a profound manifestation of faith and hope.

Francis emphasizes that humor enables us to unite people and relieve tensions, especially in times of difficulty. He affirms that laughter can be a form of communion, an act of love that transcends barriers and brings us closer to others. In addition, he points out that humor can be a powerful tool in facing adversity, allowing us to see life from a lighter and more positive perspective.

The Pope also mentions that humor reflects trust in God. By laughing at ourselves or our circumstances, we acknowledge our humanity and our dependence on God's grace. This recognition is an act of faith in the providence and goodness of God, who sustains us continually.

In his article in the *Times*, Pope Francis invites everyone, believers and non-believers, to cultivate humor in their lives. He believes that, in a world full of tensions and conflicts, humor can be a balm for the soul and a source of spiritual renewal. He concludes with a call to find in joy and laughter a manifestation of Christian hope, which impels us to live with a heart full of love and faith.

In short, Francis reminds us that humor, far from being superficial, can be a profound expression of faith and hope, capable of transforming our lives and our relationships with others.

From theory to practice

As we examine what Vincent said almost four hundred years ago and reflect on what Rahner, von Balthasar, and Pope Francis have stated in our time, the implications are clear.

Joy is not manufactured artificially. It is the fruit of God's Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) and ranks among the highest of God's gifts. It radiated from Jesus himself and attracted his followers to him. Today, if the marginalized and abandoned see us as joyful men and women who are attempting to serve them in trying circumstances, that will surely be a sign of God's presence in the world. If joy and laughter characterize our community life or our family life, that too will stand as a witness that God dwells among us.

For all the branches of his Family, Vincent highlighted humility, simplicity, and practical charity as the keys to holiness.⁵³ Humility will be evident in our Family if we can laugh at ourselves and our mistakes. Our simplicity will shine out if we can smile at the incongruity, which is sometimes glaring, between what we say and what we do. Our

⁵¹ ["Evangelii Gaudium": Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World \(24 November 2013\) | Francis](#)

⁵² [Opinion | Pope Francis: There Is Faith in Humor - The New York Times](#)

⁵³ Cf. CCD:IX:489; CCD:X:2.

practical love will be a flame that warms others daily if joy is consistently fanning that flame into a fire.

The renowned twentieth-century writer Hilaire Belloc once wrote: “There is nothing worth the wear of winning but the laughter and love of friends.”⁵⁴

Do we “serious people” sometimes underestimate the importance of being joyful? How central it is! John’s first letter summed it all up: *We are writing this so that your joy may be complete*” (1 Jn 1:4).

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⁵⁴ Hilaire Belloc, *Complete Verse*, with a preface by W. N. Roughhead (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1970) "Dedicatory Ode," 60.

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