

Be Joyful!

“Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the heart.
Serve the Lord with gladness.” (Ps 100:1–2)

A. One of the saints who had the attitude of Christian joy in a striking way was St Francis of Assisi. According to a collection of anecdotes about Francis, he once asked his closest follower, Br Leo, what Leo thought was perfect joy. Leo stumbled for an answer and finally put the question back to Francis. Francis replied: “Well, Br. Leo, when we finally plod up to the door of the Portiuncula, cold and hungry, [icicles clinging from our habits,] and knock, if the Brother there does not recognize us and calls us bums and grows impatient because bums should always appear immediately after dinner or supper and should have wine on their breaths, if he then closes the door in our faces and we remain patient, then that is the beginning of joy. And if the brother beats us besides, and [we love him for it, then that is perfect joy] if we endure all these evils and insults and blows with joy and patience, reflecting that we must accept and bear the sufferings of the Blessed Christ patiently for love of Him, oh, Br Leo, write: ‘that is perfect joy.’” [Mairead, quoting Omnibus; her p. 454]

B) Interior/Exterior. Here Francis describes joy as patient endurance out of love of Christ. The source of the joy is something interior to the one who is joyful; it rises from within the soul in spite of exterior adversity. Some who is rooted in God, heart and soul, has an abiding source of joy within him/her. This kind of joy is part of the “hundredfold” that Jesus promises to those who have left everything to follow him (Mt 19:29). The twelfth-century Cistercian abbot William of St-Thierry, writing to the Carthusians, describes it thus:

“You have undertaken the loftiest of professions. It surpasses the heavens, it is on a level with the angels, it resembles angelic purity. . . . it is for others to serve God, it is for you to cling to him; it is for others to believe in God, know him, love him and revere him; it is for you to taste him, understand him, be acquainted with him, *enjoy* him. This is no slight matter, no easy goal; but he who, in his love, makes you such promises is almighty and good. He will be faithful in fulfilling them and untiring in

giving help.” [Golden Epistle, trans Theodore Berkeley CF 12; CP: Spencer, 1971, 14]

The writings of William of St-Thierry link joy with contemplative prayer as its fruit. Br Patrick Ryan of Genesee, who has studied William deeply, writes: “Enjoyment is for William an essential aspect of loving God. He uses the word ‘enjoyment’ [*fruitio* and *frui*] six times in the *De Contemplando Deo*, and on one occasion he even claims that it merits the perfection of our love: ‘The love of desire sometimes merits sight, sight merits enjoyment [*fruitionem*], and enjoyment [*fruition*] merits the perfection of love.” [*The Experience of God* 61] “But, Lord, when something of this joy falls to my lot—and it is all too seldom that it happens—but when it does Lord then I cry aloud and shout, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here.’” [op cit 82]

There are other kinds of joy that come from the exterior, such as the joy of being rewarded, recognized, appreciated, loved by others, or the joy of unexpected good fortune, or the joy that great music or art might bring to us.

C) Forgiveness as a source of joy. Whether its source is interior or exterior, joy is the birthright of Christians. In the past, there were currents of Christian spirituality springing from Jansenism [17th-18th c movement that emphasized original sin, human depravity, and predestination] that we glorify God primarily from a position of humility, prostrate in repentance, wearing sackcloth, groaning ‘Kyrie eleison’. Today we realize that we can “serve the Lord with gladness,” as the psalmist exhorts us (Ps 100:2), with Alleluia and Hosanna. We can be happy and be pleasing to God at the same time. In fact, the more pleasing to God we are, the more conformed to his will, the happier we are.

Does this mean that there is no place for prayers of contrition in this joyful spirituality? I think if we leave all mention of repentance out of our life, we leave out one of the greatest sources of joy. What gives more joy than to hear the words, “I forgive you”? To confess my failings, ask for mercy, and know that God is saying, “Your sins are forgiven, fear not, I do not accuse you, I welcome you back.” Repentance and forgiveness give me something to be really jubilant about. Our redemption and forgiveness by

Jesus is one of the two principal foundations of Christian joy. Your own experience may verify how relieved and glad it makes you feel when you ask pardon for injuring another and are sincerely forgiven. Similarly, if you have in the past been wronged and hurt by someone and received an apology for it, and if you have been able to forgive from your heart and forget, then you know the depth of joy that can come from forgiveness and reconciliation.

The parables of forgiveness in the gospel tell us that God himself is thrilled with joy to be able to forgive; his is the joy of a shepherd bringing back his lost sheep (Lk 15:7); or of the father of the prodigal son who embraces his son and calls a feast (Lk 15:32). The redemption of humankind brought joy to God as much as it does to us, namely the joy of reconciliation and restored friendship. We have been forgiven, redeemed, saved in principle by the sacrifice of Jesus, and that is the basis for living joyfully. Whatever may happen is almost insignificant compared to the certainty, the joyful certainty of knowing that we are accepted, forgiven, loved by God who wants us to share life with him forever in his kingdom. We are destined to inherit the kingdom of heaven! Jesus says, "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Lk 10:20). "Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom."

We have a story from the Fathers of the Desert about Abba Apollo:
[p. 77] "Many of [the hermits living near Abba Apollo] only come down from the mountain at the ninth hour, and having taken part in the [daily] Eucharist leave right away, satisfied with spiritual food alone until the ninth hour of the following day. A large number of them do this for many days at a time. 52. Nevertheless, one could see them in the desert filled with a joy and [p. 78] a bodily contentment such as one cannot see on earth. For nobody among them was gloomy or downcast. If anyone did appear a little downcast [sin of *tristitia*], Father Apollo at once asked him the reason, and told each one what was in the secret recesses of his heart. 53. He used to say, 'Those who are going to inherit the kingdom of heaven must not be despondent about their salvation. The pagans are gloomy,' he said, 'and the Jews wail, and sinners mourn, but the just will rejoice. Moreover, those who are occupied with earthly things rejoice in their earthly concerns, but we who have been considered worthy of so great a hope, how shall we not rejoice without ceasing, since the Apostle urges us

to rejoice always, and to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in everything?’ (1 Th 5:16–17)” [*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, trans Norman Russell, in Russell and Benedicta Ward, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: CKP, 1981, CS 34)]

D) Creation as a source of joy. Our redemption is the principal source of our joy, and the second is the marvelous created universe in which we live. We refer to God’s creation as “Nature.” God gave our first parents a park to live in and enjoy. Paradise in its root meaning is a park, a beautiful luxuriant park with ripe fruit on the trees just for the picking. By extension, all of nature is a park, but the beauty of this park is limited, so that it does not satisfy us totally, but draws us toward God as infinite Beauty. [see Matthias Neuman, “The Benedictine Prayer of Beauty,” RR 43.6 (Nov/Dec 1984, pp 862–78)]

When we rejoice in the beauty and greatness of nature and of the human and non-human creatures God has made, then we are sharing in the Creator’s own joy over the works of his hands when he looked upon all that he had made and found it “very good” (Gen 1:31). That was on the sixth day of creation, and on the seventh day, God rested in absolute contentment, joy, and satisfaction. In the story of creation, after God brings each one of his works into being he is delighted. He steps back, as it were, and surveys it from every angle and sees that “It is very good.” If God had hands, he might have clapped his hands in joy at all the wonderful beings that he brought into the world, and at the order and harmony of it all. He made everything with wisdom. The book of Proverbs personifies divine wisdom and has her say:

When he established the heavens, there was I, ^h

when he marked out the vault over the face of the deep;

28 When he made firm the skies above,

when he fixed fast the springs of the deep;

29 When he set for the sea its limit,

so that the waters should not transgress his command;

When he fixed the foundations of earth,
30 then was I beside him as artisan;^{*i}
I was his delight day by day,
playing before him all the while,
31 Playing over the whole of his earth,
having my delight with human beings. (Prv 8:27–31)

As time went on, creation brought grief to its Creator, but also, I think, a great deal of amusement. That’s why the psalmists says, “He who sits in the heavens laughs” (Ps 2:4). God laughs not only at the wicked who think they are mighty, but also laughs at the pious who by their pious practices and rituals are seeking sincerely to please him.

In a sense, all of creation is playfully irrelevant. It does not need to exist in the first place. It is like a game played by heavenly wisdom before the throne of God, or creation is a result of Wisdom’s game. “I was his delight day by day, playing before him all the while, playing over the whole of his earth” (Prv 8:30–31). Creation exists just to delight the Creator, as if he were watching a cosmic game.

Hindu mythology teaches that God is playful, and that the divine creative energy is named Lila (literally “the play or dance of the gods”). Lila dances the universe into existence for the sheer fun of it, as a plaything. The joy of laughter and cheerfulness.

Julian of Norwich said God gave creatures laughter in order to comfort themselves and to help them rejoice in God (13, 349:30–31). In her 5th Showing, as she lay on her sickbed, she burst out laughing at the enemy—Satan—and her laughter was so contagious that those present in the room laughed aloud with her, though they did not see the revelation of the demon that Julian saw. We too can laugh at evil, because Christ has triumphed over it. The Devil may promise happiness, but can produce only gloom and doom.

E) The Spirit of Tevye

As a whole the OT may seem to present a stern and solemn picture of God's relationship to human beings, not a joyful one. The Bible is not a joke book, although we may find things to laugh at in it. The story of Balaam and his talking donkey, for instance. The living tradition of the Jewish people has preserved more of the missing joyful element of Biblical religion. Jewish people, despite their history of being persecuted, are an exuberantly joyful people. It is their sense of humor that has kept them going during times of persecution. They know that God is ultimately in charge of creation.

The Jewish Hasidic mystical literature has a good number of humorous tales, revolving around situations in daily life and around a well turned phrase of the Master.

Once some disciples of Rabbi Pinchas ceased talking in embarrassment when he entered the House of Study. When he asked them what they were talking about, they said: "Rabbi, we were saying how afraid we are that the Evil Urge will pursue us."

"Don't worry," he replied. "You have not gotten high enough for it to pursue you. For the time being, you are still pursuing it." [Evil Urge = original sin, or concupiscence]

Three youths hid themselves on a Sabbath in a barn in order to smoke. Hasidim discovered them and wished to flog the offenders. One youth exclaimed: "I deserve no punishment, for I forgot that today is the Sabbath." The second youth said: "And I forgot that smoking on the Sabbath is forbidden." The third youth raised his voice and cried out: "I, too, forgot." "What did you forget?" he was asked. The lad replied: "I forgot to lock the door of the barn."

[retrieved from <http://chippit.tripod.com/tales1.html>]

The same tradition of "joie de vivre" [we'll come back to that phrase] can be found in the Broadway play/ movie/ record "Fiddler on the Roof" especially in the character Tevye. Tevye was played by an actor, Chaim Topol, who they say was an incorrigible comic in real life. Tevye the fiddler has a spirit of joy that bubbles up in song, laughter, and dance even on the rooftop. He has a spirit of playfulness that rolls freely with the punches of life. The spirit of Tevye is needed in monasteries, so that we don't take

ourselves too seriously. We need to cultivate what the French call *joie de vivre*, meaning an exultation of spirit, or a cheerful enjoyment of life as if there is not a care in the world, or even if there are cares. Perhaps the Song of Mary, the Magnificat, suggests that *joie de vivre* when she sings “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” *Joie de vivre* suggests the tingling of vitality felt in one’s whole being, as if you were a stringed instrument with the strings pulled taut to sound just the right pitch, every string in harmony.

In these reflections on joy in the Hebrew tradition, which is the Biblical tradition, it will be profitable to see what the psalms have to say about serving the Lord with gladness. Or more specifically, what the psalms tell us about the joyful spirit of the psalmists. The psalmists write what is in their hearts; they do not hold back their joy any more than they hold back their anger.

Add pp 94 – 97 from *Songs of Freedom* as annotated.

As human beings we all have the capacity to find enjoyment in life at least once in a while, at least in favorable circumstances. We might even go so far as to let ourselves relax and be spontaneously playful once in a while. Playful people, adults as well as children, enjoy life and feel fulfilled by giving of themselves to others. Their spontaneous playfulness can be contagious and serve to bring relief and good humor to others.

Jesus was definitely a joyful man. He said to his followers: “I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). The monks is one who claims that promise of Jesus, a promise of complete and overflowing joy. Christ’s own absolute joy is in us, his own infinite, overflowing joy in God his Father. Perhaps the name of that joy is Holy Spirit. We have the life of God dwelling within us, permeating us, spilling over in boundless joy. Look into the eyes of a new convert or of someone who has just had a deep experience of God in prayer, and you will see that joy spilling over. On a retreat the 38 year old mother of three children wrote about her joy in discovering God: “I felt as if all the pleasures of my life: intellectual, maternal, aesthetic, sensual, sexual were all rolled up into, then multiplied a thousand million times, and maybe this began to approach only slightly the new pleasure I found in

God” [see Linda Sabbath, *The Radiant Heart* chap “Absolute Joy” p 56]. That is indeed what it may be like at one’s first encounter with God’s love, but then time goes on, the extraordinary gets ordinary, we get distracted, the sparkle goes out of our eyes, and we may forget about the life-giving, joy-giving Spirit who dwells in our hearts.

A person of prayer, a contemplative, is not supposed to forget so easily. Instead he or she is expected to be permanently joyful although not necessarily always bubbling over in laughter. For a contemplative like Julian of Norwich, for instance, joy springs from the profound, abiding conviction that “All shall be well.” There will be pain and suffering in the world and in my life, but there is also a spirit of joy in all created reality, the joy of living, existing, being, having been permitted to be, having been drawn out of nothingness by the superabundant goodness of the Creator. Joy rises from the depths of every human heart in which that Creator dwells in three divine persons.

Therefore the person of faith is able to preserve a joyful spirit right to the end, right down to the wire, right up to the dying moment, whatever the circumstances of his or her death might be. When Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was taken away by his guards to be executed after a year or two in the Flossenberg concentration camp, witnesses reported that his face was shining with happiness. The guards themselves noticed it and were amazed. His face radiated joy and happiness in that place of horrors, at that horrible moment of execution. The one joyful man to be seen was the prisoner about to be executed. He was acting out in his own body the paschal mystery; he knew it and rejoiced. A death like that reflects the summit of Christian joy, namely, to be taken up consciously into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Next let us look at the natural psychological basis of the spiritual joy of a Christian who has given himself/herself to God. The still influential Dr. Sigmund Freud believed, toward the end of his life and his studies of human personality, that in our time good health, mental-physical wholeness, consists in “the capability to work and the capability for enjoyment.” Perhaps Dr Freud is thinking more of men than of women, but he uses the words *Work* and *Joy*. If one or the other of these is entirely missing or seriously under stress in our life, we are on the way to

unhappiness, illness, and possibly madness. The quality of one's life depends on good health.

The ability to play is as important as the ability to work; if you can work playfully and productively at the same time, perhaps that is the ideal. Love what you have to do. Do what you love. All work and no play makes for depression. As someone has said: "The marvel of play is that it reminds us that productive work is not the ultimate end of man. Man was made not *just* to shape the world but to delight in it, not just to *glorify* God but to enjoy Him forever." [Harvey Cox, *Seduction of the Spirit*, 328]

Religious communities, like families, should have rituals of sharing playfully, being playful together. If not the entire community, then maybe a portion of it, the volunteers.

It's easier to think of ways that individuals may express their sense of joy, sense of humor. Although the rule of silence tends to put a damper on certain forms of expressing joy, such as singing or whistling while you work, or singing in the shower. Some activities that might not disturb others could include:

- 1) telling a joke at an appropriate time. Like the brother who wanted the doctor to install a dimmer switch on his confrere's pacemaker, so that when they wanted him to keep quiet they could turn down his heart rate but when they wanted him to do some work they could rev up his heart rate.
- 2) saying something in a clever or humorous way in the course of conversation.
- 3) introducing the element of surprise or variety into tasks or routines that tend to become monotonous
- 4) remember that people tend to pick up from the mood you project. If you approach an ultra serious person in a smiling, friendly manner, they may respond in the way that you come across: being serious if you are serious, being lighthearted or friendly if you lighten up.

A corollary to this way of dealing with super-serious people is deliberately to introduce confusion by making an irrelevant remark out of the blue. "Have you heard how much the price of beer has dropped in Belgium?" This nonsense confuses the other party and might make them drop their armor of negativity. It's called "indirect communication through confusion."

5) deliberately make a somewhat embarrassing mistake, a humiliating blunder that makes people laugh—e.g. mispronouncing a word— and you won't mind making mistakes so much afterwards. The world did not come to an end. Perhaps no one even noticed or laughed. It frees you.

The heart of playfulness as change of attitude from solemnity to whimsy lies on the spirit-level of life, the level of faith in a power greater than yourself. You can connect with it in many ways and you know that this higher power does not keep score. Our higher power is God of course.

You connect with divine power by, for example, volunteering to give of yourself for non-monetary gain, in loving service, as you do by becoming a volunteer at HTA and helping this aging community of monks. Or you may connect with the divine power by “creative suffering,” in the sense that Victor Frankl and others use the term, which means offering up your afflictions to benefit others. We cannot ignore or entirely avoid the negativity around us in the world, but we can turn it to the benefit of others intentionally. It happens when we give up something comforting to ourselves so that things may go a little better or easier for our neighbor. Giving love away brings love back to you, and that is supremely fulfilling. It gives you joy. Or the practice of “payback” in the good sense of paying back into the fund of the world the goodness that you have received from it and for which you are grateful. It's always payback time. In paying back what you feel you “owe” to the world, to life, to your country, to God's providence, you do it for a certain length of time until things seem to come into balance. Then you may discontinue your effort, your sacrifice, if you wish, before it becomes an oppressing burden that runs you into the ground. When others thank you or offer repayment, you say, “Just pass it on,” “do the same for someone else.” This is called “pay forward.” This behavior creates ripples of playfulness in our serious world, ripples of joy and good deeds. Don't keep score, just be generous, playful.

One is never too old or too young to learn playfulness. Every age of life has its rewards, its built-in playfulness, if you tune into it. [following based on Carl J Pfeifer, newspaper column:] Joy releases the child in us, that we may have forgotten about or even suppressed: our capacity for simple and unaffected playfulness . . . the ability to let go of life's deadly seriousness and enter into a world of spontaneity, freedom, and creative fun. The Old Testament pictures God's creative Wisdom at play: “When he

set the heavens in their place, I was there, his darling and delight, playing in his presence continually, playing on the earth” (Prv 8:22–31). Then the Word became flesh, became a little child on the earth. When that child grew up, he did not lose his capacity for spontaneity and joyous freedom, and he told us: “I assure you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a little child shall not enter into it” (Mk 10:15). So the joy of the kingdom is the carefree joy of children at play in the presence of their Father. That should be the style of our life, our lifestyle.

The secret is to let go of oneself, especially one’s scrupulous, solemn, uptight self. As Jesus says, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Mt 16:25). When you manage to let go of yourself, you are free, liberated, reborn. You you're your true self. You begin to experience the joy of the Holy Spirit, the joy or bliss that comes from breaking free of all that shackled you. Things like getting up at 3:15 AM no longer seem like sacrifices. They are a joy. Live joyfully. Smile. Lose the frown, if you have one. St Benedict wants “no one to be vexed or saddened in the house of God” (RB 31d:19 *perturbetur, contristetur*). What vexeth thee, brother?

A former Secretary General of the UN, U. Thant, a Buddhist, talks in his book *View from the UN* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977, 21-22) about the principle of altruistic joy that the Buddhists call *mudita*. He says: “One’s life gains in joy by sharing in the happiness of others, as if that happiness were one’s own.” Of course that presumes that you can find somebody who is genuinely happy so that you can sympathize with their joy and let their happiness generate happiness in you, so that you in turn can pass it on to others. U. Thant says: “The person who cultivates altruistic joy (*mudita*) radiates it over everyone in his surroundings, and thus everyone enjoys working and living with him. The practice of *mudita* not only dispels worry and frustrations but strengthens our moral fiber. Thus a true Buddhist is expected to pray for the happiness of all human beings. By practicing *mudita*, one automatically renders an important service to the entire community.” There is someone who holds a low level assembly-line job at a pharmaceutical company but who is a joyful person, smiling at others, even singing softly while she works. Co-workers ask why she is joyful all the time, and they don’t understand her but they join in her songs and like to have her working in their room. It’s *mudita*, altruistic joy.

It's the opposite of a depressed, negative view of life that sees only the bad side of things, whatever may happen. There is a saying that I've seen attributed to Oscar Wilde and to G B Shaw: "There are two tragedies or disappointments in life. The first is not getting what you want. The second is getting what you want." That is to say, life is a downer no matter what happens. Getting what you want always turns out to be less than you expected it to be and never satisfies you for long.

Nevertheless, as followers of Jesus, we have to believe that we were made for joy and that Jesus desires nothing less than that for us. He wants us to share the joy he has, his joy in his Father and in their Holy and life-giving Spirit. He says, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (Jn 15:11). He is talking about a joy that comes from being perfectly attuned to God's plan for us, God's will for us, doing always what pleases God our Father, as Jesus himself did. We do not have to see the Father or see Jesus in order to realize this joy, but we do have to love them and let them love us in all our unworthiness. God's love is the source of our worthiness.

Someone who lived a life of joy in spite of long periods of interior spiritual desolation was Bl. Theresa of Calcutta. In 1978 she spoke at a gathering of MCs in St Louis and touched on the topic of joy. She told them:

"Joy is prayer—the sign of our generosity, selflessness, and close and continual union with God. Joy is love. A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love, for she gives most who gives with joy. God loves a cheerful giver.

"Joy is a net of love by which we can catch souls. A sister serves with joy and preaches without preaching. Joy is a need and power for us, even physically, for it makes us always ready to go about doing good.

"The joy of the Lord is our strength. Therefore each of us will accept to love the life of poverty in cheerful trust; to imitate the chastity of Mary, the cause of our joy; to offer cheerful obedience from inward joy; to minister to Christ in His distressing disguise with cheerful devotion.

"The best way to show our gratitude to God and to our people is to accept everything with joy. A joyful Sister is like the sunshine of God's love,

the hope of eternal happiness, the flame of burning love. Filling our souls with this joy is the beginning and end of holiness.”

In contrast to Bl. Theresa’s lofty ideal of joy, if our idea of joy is limited to “living it up” or “having a blast,” or “having fun (wherever it is to be had)” we may have a problem being joyful in a monastery, because the occasions for living it up in the worldly sense are few and far between. I am still waiting. Not that we volunteered at the monastery in order to be miserable. Seeking God and being self-disciplined and even ascetical or austere in our way of life does not exclude joy or dry up a person’s capacity for playfulness and appreciation of good things, beautiful things. Instead, asceticism or self-discipline fine-tunes our sensitivity. A Carmelite retreat master once told us, “A saint get more joy out of a single glass of beer than a slob does out of a keg.” If you think about it, the saint appreciates it more because he gets it less frequently and because he has a more finely tuned appreciation of everything in life.

A document on “Human Values” from the Cistercian General Chapter of 1971 says: “Our persons and our communities should radiate peace and joy, signs of a life humanly fulfilled and of true relations with others and with God, fruits of the Spirit” (Appendix 12). When the Chapter speaks of “radiating” peace and joy, the implication is that it isn’t true peace and joy unless it spills over and radiates out. Joy is expansive, it can’t be contained, it has to be expressed, it bubbles over. “Joy is like the Rain”—it fills to overflowing.

One normal outlet for expressing the joy we feel in our heart should be the liturgy. Our hymns and psalms should rise from joyful hearts, not to mention that they should be on pitch and in harmony with others, or else it won’t be joyful for our neighbor. When we sing “Alleluia,” which means “praise the Lord,” we can sing it with gusto. And if at the sign of peace at Mass we can manage a little smile, it might help to communicate a sense of joy. The Book of Proverbs says “A glad heart lights up the face, but an anguished heart breaks the spirit” (Prv 15:13). And Ben Sira says “The sign of a good heart is a radiant face; withdrawn and perplexed is the toiling schemer” (Sir 13:26).

To say a bit more about the exclamation *Alleluia*, “praise the Lord, brother/sister.” The liturgy uses Alleluia all year around except during Lent, but it uses it in excess during the Paschal season. In the Latin liturgy, it was

not uncommon to sing eight or ten Alleluias in a row, or a single Alleluia with the final “ah” prolonged for eight or ten measures. That’s called a “jubilus,” a shout of joy. Christ is risen, Alleluia! That’s the source of a Christian’s joy, that’s the “Good News.” A Christians we bet our lives on the truth that Christ has risen indeed and opened for us the way to the Father. Our faith should be reflected in our joyful approach toward life and even reflected in our countenance once in a while.

St Augustine talks about the joyful practice of jubilating. Remember I said that Gregorian chant sometimes prolongs the final “ah” of Alleluia for eight or ten measures? Augustine says “Where speech does not suffice . . . they break into singing on vowel sounds. . . . You already know what it is to jubilate. Rejoice and speak. If your joy is too great for words, if you cannot express your joy, jubilate He who sings a jubilus does not utter words; he pronounces a wordless sound of joy . . . he simply lets his joy burst forth without words; his voice then appears to express a happiness so intense that he cannot formulate it What is jubilation? Joy that cannot be expressed in words; yet the voice expresses what is conceived within and cannot be explained verbally; this is jubilation!” (John Michael Talbot, *The Fire of God* [Crossroad 1987] 42, quoting *Sounds of Wonder* by Eddi Ensley.)

Outside the liturgy, St Paul exhorts Christians to carry on the same joyful spirit of the liturgy but interiorly. He tells the Ephesians to address “one another [in] psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Eph 5:19–20).

Everyone sings his/her own song, which is the song of our life. It’s the song each of us is born to sing. This song is sung in our daily behavior as well as in our words and thoughts. Each one has to find the right voice, the right melody, the right pitchon which to sing the song of his life, the song that incarnates what he thinks life is all about. When you greet your brother with a smile as you pass him, you’re singing your song. You’re also singing your song when you learn to find joy in life’s simple pleasures, such as the beauty of nature, the satisfaction of a job well done, the joy of a slice of oven fresh bread, the joy of a cool drink of water after working in the sun. Above all, we want to learn to find and express joy in prayer. “Rejoice in the Lord always!” says St Paul. Then he repeats, “I say it again, Rejoice!” (Phil 4:4).

One of the saints who lived this spirit of joy and encouraged her nuns to live it was the great Teresa of Avila. In her *Way of Perfection* she writes: “This is what we must strive for earnestly, to be affable, agreeable and pleasing to persons with whom we deal, especially our Sisters” (Kavanaugh/Rodriguez ICS 1980, Chap 41.7, p. 200). One of the convents Teresa founded had resolved not to tell funny stories or be witty during their daily recreation period. When Teresa learned of this, she told them: “We’re dull enough by nature already; you don’t have to add to it in the name of grace.” Teresa said she prayed for a clown in every community, to keep the others off balance. Teresa herself would sometimes pick up the tambourine and play the clown or lead a dance to loosen up the spirits of the nuns.

Joyful playfulness or lightheartedness (I don’t say lightheadedness) does not come easily to people who are overly serious. Overly serious people obstruct the action of the Holy Spirit by trying too hard. Someone who tries too hard will eventually be worn out by his self imposed program of heroics. He pushes himself to the limit, which is well beyond the point of joyfulness. He becomes haggard, worn out, irritable, grumpy, snapping at others, hard to live with. He lacks a trusting, playful confidence in God’s fatherly care and protection.

Nevertheless, there’s a time and a place for everything, and a monastery is supposed to be full of genuine joy but not full of silliness and frivolity. To describe the appropriate tone of life in a monastery, St Benedict likes to use the term *gravitas*. He uses it six times in the RB, usually in a context of recommending silence. He means *gravitas* in the sense of restraint of speech and an appropriate seriousness. “Seriousness” might be the best translation of *gravitas*. Benedictine seriousness does not exclude joy and merriment. The monk is merry and serious both. At the heart of his merriment is *gravitas*. And at the heart of his seriousness there is a twinkle in the eye, the merriment of knowing that he is cared for by a loving Father, that he is in touch with the reality of the risen Christ. He prays with the psalmist, “You will show me the path of life, the fullness of joy in your presence” (Ps 16:10–11). We dwell in God’s presence in the monastery, which is the house of God, and we have a right to the joy of dwelling here, the joy of dwelling in the Lord (1 Jn 5:19). Also the joy that comes from serving the community, giving of ourselves to others, affirming

them and watching them bloom. Some, to be sure, are late bloomers, but give them time. Cheerfulness and good humor are like a drop of penetrating oil that makes everything run smoothly in community life.

Getting back to the RB, I think we find a good description of the reality of Christian joy, though without the actual word, at the end of the Prologue: “as we progress in our monastic life and in faith, our hearts shall be enlarged, and we shall run with unspeakable sweetness of love in the way of God’s commandments.” That enlarging of the heart and that unspeakable sweetness is Christian joy. Monastic life is supposed to overflow with this kind of joy. I remember one novice who made the observation that “we are all a bunch of clowns here.” Perhaps he meant that our life is ridiculous, or perhaps he meant that there is a gap between what we aspire to be and what we actually are, a gap so big as to be hilarious. I think it’s amusing and good for humility to think of ourselves as a bunch of clowns sometimes. Let a stranger walk into one of our community discussions or one of our classes, and he is likely to think of a bunch of clowns holding forth on things they know almost nothing about. We deserve to be laughed at also for the way we take little things so seriously, and the way we get so bent out of shape over petty issues.

Pettiness undermines our joy, but the person who knows that he is a redeemed human being walking always under the loving, protecting gaze of a heavenly Father will be able to take petty problems in stride, and move beyond them lightheartedly and joyfully. When humiliations or failings happen, he will keep a sense of humor, a playful spirit, and a simplicity that makes him content to look silly at times. He can keep his self-respect but lose his sense of self-importance. He can be flexible and flow with the demands of the changing situation, because he trusts that he can count on the constant, caring divine presence underlying and surrounding every situation. As the title of a book says, *Relax and Rejoice: The Hand at the Tiller is Firm* (book by Fr Raymond of Gethsemani).

Since we have been talking so much about joy, I could be giving you the idea that any kind of humor, any remark that draws a laugh, is to be encouraged and promoted, maybe repeated. However, humor is not an infallible sign of true joy, and may be something cruel, if we are ridiculing people or embarrassing them before others, actually hurting them for the sake of a laugh. Susan Muto notes: “I can [also] make the other the brunt

of my envious, cynical, leveling remarks, disguised as humor” (*Steps Along the Way* 148–51; source of this section). By my clever, humorous remark I put someone down. I belittle him in his own eyes and in the eyes of others who hear it and laugh at him. Humor used this way is like a weapon, and it can be destructive. It hurts peoples’ feelings.

Humor at our own expense is often better and sometimes funnier. It strengthens my humility to be able to laugh at my own silliness and ignorance, my harmless mistakes. “At this point humor becomes the recognition and acceptance of my [humanity, my] finiteness.” (Muto)

If I lack a sense of humor in the monastery, it may be because I am a little too vain. I may be too touchy, unable to take or make a joke, suspicious that others are envious of me or malicious to me. A sense of humor helps me admit that I am fallible and flawed and imperfect, like the rest of the human race. It’s good to admit that truth, and at the same time believe that God loves me in spite of my flaws. So I am free to be myself. I do not have to put on a mask to hide my weakness, my stupidity. I am free to be who I really am before the world. To have an easy smile or laugh is the echo of one’s inner freedom, one’s inner life of freedom and love. Blessed Columba Marmion, OSB, is often quoted as saying “Joy is the echo of God’s life in us.” Where God is, there is freedom and love and joy. We can be joyful people because we are free and in love with God; everything else in the world is a matter of relative importance. Don’t take it too seriously.

True joy is to be differentiated from a mood of giggling hysteria. Sometimes you meet people who seem to be frequently hysterical, easily excitable, on a permanent high. Their high is not really so permanent. If you have a chance to observe them over a period of time, you will probably see that they have their down days as well; their mood of elation turns to depression, moroseness, even gloom. At an extreme, they may even swing back and forth between high and low, elation and depression. If today they’re at the peak, tomorrow they may be in the trough of the wave. The higher they peak, the deeper they trough. This pathology is called manic-depressive neurosis and it can be treated effectively with a drug called lithium that restores a hormonal balance in their system.

True Christian joy is nothing like such moodswings. It is a permanent underlying current of contentment that can co-exist with passing, surface moods of excitement or disappointment. Life in a monastery should be permeated with Christian optimism, because we have already received the firstfruits of our eternal reward. “. . . the joy that is given by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 9:17). Any temptation to gloomy despair comes from the Evil One who tries in a million ways to make us forget that God surrounds and envelops us with divine love every step of our life. The Evil One, the spirit of gloom, tries to make us think that we are all alone and everything depends on our own effort. If that were true, there would indeed be grounds for gloom and despair. But we are not alone, not forgotten, not helpless. We may not feel God’s presence but we believe and trust it, and that is our joy. Just as we believe that God is all-powerful and all-wise, we also believe that God is all-love and does everything out of love and would not have made anything that his love could not embrace. God is all good and will not permit anything to happen that his love cannot embrace. That is the deeper cause of Christian joy.

Macropaedia 4: Christianity by EWB [professor in a German university], p. 489:
“Friedrich Nietzsche summarized his critique of the Christians of his time in the words of Zarathustra [Zoroaster]: ‘They would have to sing better songs to me, that I might believe in their Redeemer: his disciples would have to look more redeemed!’” The critique is to the point. Attributed to Teilhard de Chardin (also to Leon Bloy) is the statement: “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

In the New Testament, joy appears as the characteristic mark of distinction of the Christian. It is the spontaneous result of being filled with the Holy Spirit and is among the main fruits of the Holy Spirit. Joy was the basic mood of early Christian gatherings and was often expressed in exuberant jubilation. It has its origin in the recognition that the dominion of evil is already broken by the power of Jesus; that death, the devil, and all his demons, no longer possess any claim upon human beings, unless someone sells his soul to the devil. Because of Jesus’ Resurrection, the forces of forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation are already effective in human society. This principle of Christian joy is particularly alive and well in the lengthy liturgies of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The roots of a specifically Christian sense of humor also lie within this joy. Christian humor is a subset within the category of joy. Christian humor can laugh even at affliction because affliction will never have the last word. Jesus has achieved victory over all affliction and suffering and achieved it for each of us. The Cross is a sign of ultimate victory and triumph. "By this sign you will conquer," it was said to Constantine. Christians will indeed have trouble in this world, as Jesus predicted (Jn 16:3), but he also said "Take courage, I have conquered the world." The Easter song "Alleluia, praise the Lord," is the Christian's song of joy and exultation. It's the song that our heart knows, even if on the surface there are tears.

Practice putting a smile on your face until you no longer have to strain to do it. "People who are inclined to see the negative side of things are usually given more credit for having a better grasp of reality than those who see the positive side of things. Jennifer James, popular anthropologist in the Seattle area, put it rather bluntly: 'Why do we think happy is dumb?' She observes that clowns are regarded as fools. People who smile a lot are suspect. Could it be that people who frown a lot know something the rest of mankind does not? But why is the opposite not also true? Could not a smile be saying, 'I know something you don't?'" [quoted from Charles A Gallagher and Thomas L Vandenberg, *The Celibacy Myth: Loving for Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1987)]

Maybe you've heard the saying, "Smile and the word smiles with you. Cry and you cry alone." And "Smile, because it makes people wonder what you're up to." And "It takes three times as many face muscles to frown as to smile." Scowling folks resent smiling folks because they think they're after something, they want to borrow money or something. Whereas in fact those who smile may simply be happy and optimistic about life. Scowling people probably do not come from homes where the parents are friendly, encouraging, warm, smiling a lot. A family psychologist from the U of Michigan observed that "Frowns are a type of psycho-pollution that is as deadly as smoke fumes or mercury in drinking water." Scowling is deadly because it kills one's own soul and that of others. Laughter, on the contrary, is the best medicine. "Laughter benefits the lungs, clears the respiratory system, provides a healthful, emotional outlet and counteracts boredom" (Antoinette Bosco, "People who smile are simply optimistic about life" Intermountain Catholic article from which this paragraph borrows; undated). In the monastery we take smiling very seriously.

We'll conclude with that marvelous passage in 1 Pt 1:8 about Christian joy that goes: "Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy" (1 Pt 1:8)