

Humor from the Pulpit

Rev. E. Charles Bauer



Newark, N.Y. — Most people believe the liturgy is no laughing matter and that's what's the matter with the liturgy, according to Father E. Charles Bauer who would like to see a sense of humor both in the pulpit and in the pew.

"I think it is regrettable that we find it so difficult, or out of place, to laugh or to create laughter in the house of God," declared Father Bauer in an article he wrote for the latest issue of "Today's Parish."

Father Bauer, reminding that "God did not forbid us to be funny in church or laugh in the liturgy," called for a greater use of humor by priests in their homilies, by lecturers in their readings and announcements, by song directors and a lesser fear of laughter on the part of the parishioners.

Attributing the latter to the fact that "as little children we learned that laughing and talking in church was a sin," Father Bauer argued that since "now the spoken word is a prominent part of our worship, it seems that judicious laughing in church should be as legitimate as programmed talking."

The chaplain at the mental institution here recounted his experiences in using humor in the pulpit — with the mental patients and with what he called "normal" parishioners when he celebrates Mass outside the mental institution.

Among the examples of humor from the pulpit that were mentioned by Father Bauer were: the use of a pair of musical cymbals to dramatize St. Paul's dissertation on the need for true Christian charity; use of words like "Achtung!" to get attention; giving a phrase in Spanish, French, Italian and several other languages to perk up a homily on the Pentecostal "gift of tongues"; reference to comic characters such as Dennis the Menace or Snoopy, and appropriate jokes.

"Humor in church simply does not make sense to most people," he said of the latter group. "Once in a while a mildly comical remark is made from the pulpit. Then I always find it interesting to observe from my vantage point how few people are brave enough to manage a wry smile."

"I think the majority of them are truly afraid," Father Bauer declared. "They are afraid of breaking the ice of formalism which has always surrounded their worship."

"They are afraid to break the isolation which has always insulated them from one another — and from their leader. They have not yet entered into the spirit of community which would allow them to relax — to be 'natural' in this 'supernatural' situation. They have not yet become able to feel 'at home' in church."

"I have said that I believe laughter in the liturgy is important. I did not mean exclusively for the retarded. Nor do

I mean laughter at the liturgy, or at the expense of reverence. "There is no greater respect for the liturgical functions, no better attention at Mass, no more devotion in church anywhere than in this institution for the mentally retarded. But there is a lot more evidence of Christian joy than I have been able to find in 'normal' parishes.

"One obvious reason for that is, of course, that the retarded do not have the inhibitions which sometimes afflict the rest of our society. I say 'afflict,' because I think it is regrettable that we find it so difficult (or out of place) to laugh, or to create laughter, in the house of God. And I consider it regrettable, because I believe that the practice of religion should not only be joyful but enjoyable — not entertaining, but enjoyable and joyful.

"Surely there is enough that is sour and dour in the world today. Isn't it too bad that so many bring to church the sour faces that for too long have been ascribed to the saints and the dour outlook that so mistakenly has been identified with sanctity? The holy men and women of the past were not sad sacks, and sadness is not an essential element for sanctity in the present, either.

"Perhaps the most encouraging affirmation of these facts is the momentum being gained every day by the singing of folk music in our churches. Whether it appeals to you or not, you have to admit that it certainly is a decided departure from the sedate solemnity and the reserved renderings of the past. Most of the modern music being used in our liturgy is not sad. However, it is not funny, either."

Lately, he said, "have to understand that humor is intended and that the normal response to humor is expected. If a funny thing happens on the way to the altar, I am sure the Lord expects the natural response."

"I am sure that the humor in church is not offensive to God, Father Bauer stressed, adding that he was not "advocating ecclesiastical flippancy" in urging priests to use humor in the pulpit.

"Some priests will surely say: People will think I'm corny. They don't have to laugh. All humor does not necessarily provoke outright laughter (check yourself when you read the 'comic strips'). But it surely would be better if they would laugh. You see, the reason the congregation won't laugh will probably result from their lack of a sense of humor, rather than from the actual lack of humor in the pulpit. I say 'sense of humor,' because humor in church simply does not make sense to most people.

"I think the majority of them are truly afraid. They are afraid of breaking the ice of formalism which has always surrounded their worship. They are afraid to break the isolation which has always insulated them from one another — and from their leader.

"They would have not yet entered into the spirit of community which would allow them to relax to be 'natural' in this 'supernatural' situation. They have not yet become able to feel 'at home' in church.

"And, of course, the priest finds himself in a similar situation. He is not relaxed up there in his ivory tower, any more than they are 'down there' in their formal rows of benches.

"He is not ready, spontaneously, to seize upon the opportunities for humor as they present themselves, because he, too, is subject to a homiletic formalism which may cause him to react like the amateur thespian who obediently waits for the script to state 'Here, everybody laughs.'

"If you agree with the dictionary that 'to laugh' means '... to feel or suggest joyousness; appear bright and gay,' then you can see the importance of laughter in the liturgy, which surely should be joyous, and of humor in the homily, which ought to make us bright and gay," Father Bauer stated.

"To be sure," he concluded, "we do not go to church, or participate in the liturgy, merely to be cheered up. I do not believe that humor from the pulpit should ever be an end in itself. I believe that it should be used sparingly, and pointedly.

"Regardless of whether or not

the clang of a cymbal in the pulpit may sound funny to you, it did sound funny to my retarded congregation, and they laughed. They also paid immediate attention. And because they were 'in the right mood,' not just listening, but happy to listen, I think they really understood that 'claiming it loudly' does not mean love any more than clanging loudly means music. I think they 'learned a lesson' from that funny little act."

Prisoners' Wives Seek Pope's Help

Vatican City — (NC) — Two U.S. women have visited the Papal Secretariat of State to enlist Pope Paul VI's help in their efforts to learn whether their husbands, missing in action in Vietnam, are living or dead.

Mrs. Paula Hartness and Mrs. Bonnie Singleton were assured by Archbishop-elect William Carey that the Holy See would do its utmost to obtain word of their husbands.

In a meeting of some 45 minutes, Archbishop-elect Carey said the Pope is constantly trying to get information on prisoners in conflicts wherever they erupt.

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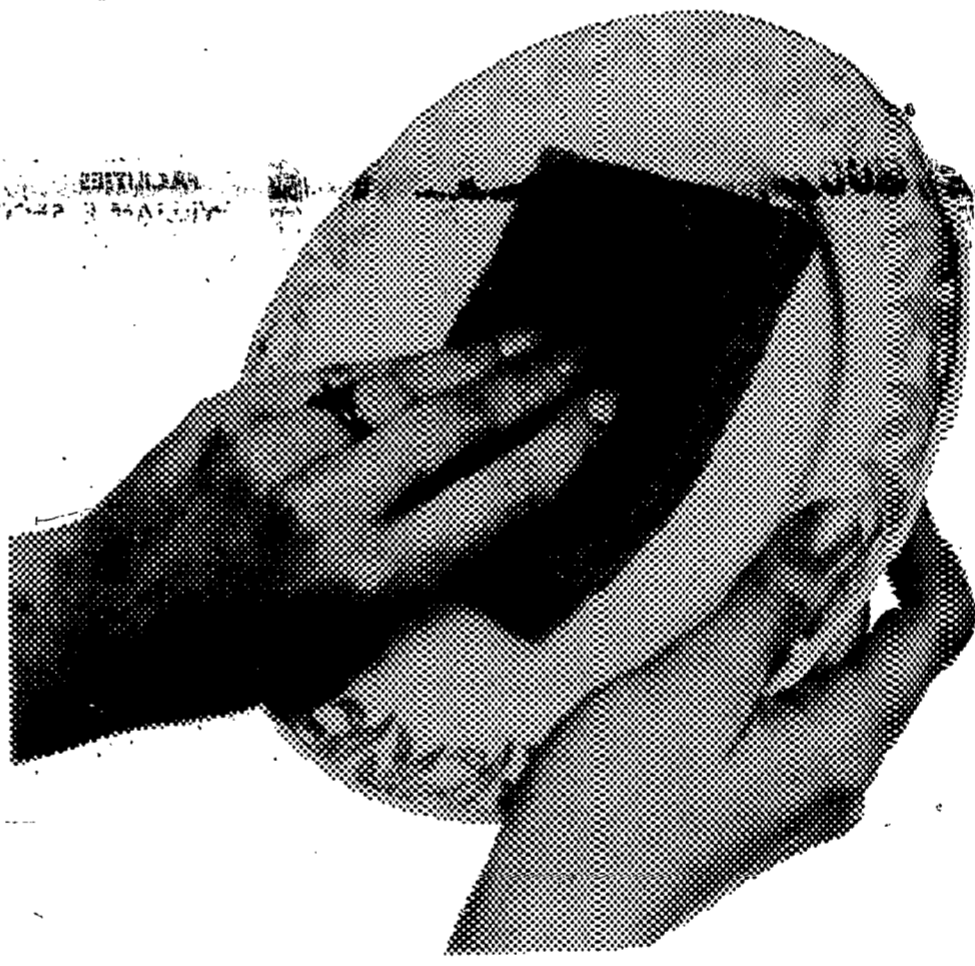
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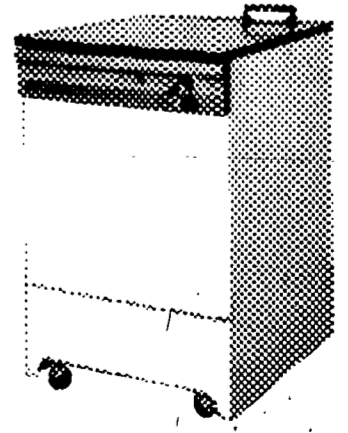
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