

**PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE**

**Humor — Some Johannine Samplings**

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Throughout history the Church has been considered as an institution of no nonsense — dedicated to a mission which would never tolerate the slightest bit of levity about the folly of our human aberrations. Saints worthy of the honor were always cast in the mold resembling the classic Puritanical and unsmiling American Gothic. But it is hard to imagine ambassadors of good news and the glad tidings of the Gospel settled into this role. Earlier chroniclers of the lives of the saints seemed to stress the oddities of people supposedly worthy of our imitation. And most of us thought: "I can't be like them, nor do I even want to be." Thanks be to God, modern hagiography places the saints within range of our imitation as it stresses their humanness. I find this reading inspirational.

Last week I wrote about the good news that was the life of Pope John XXIII. Today I offer some samplings of his humor which may put to flight the ridiculousness of our contemporary and unsmiling seriousness. Let's try this as an exercise in flexing our facial muscles and exposing our dentures:

While Apostolic Nuncio in Paris he found himself at a banquet seated next to an elegant dinner partner who was wearing a

gown of perilously low décolletage. Instead of being censorious, or embarrassed, or pretending to ignore it, when dessert was served he invited her to take an apple which he held out to her. When she expressed surprise at this gesture, he explained with a sly smile, "Please do take it, Madame. It was only after Eve ate the apple that she became aware of how little she had on." (As told by Sydney Harris.)

And this may be another version of the same incident. "I do not find it very courteous that no one is admiring the gown that this good woman has gone to such pains to choose for this affair. Instead, everyone is looking at the Nuncio — to see how he is taking it." (As reported by Lawrence Elliott in his recent biography of Pope John.)

When he was Patriarch of Venice and Spring tides flooded the great square in front of St. Mark's he was forced to cut through a café known as the Beer Hall of the Little Lions. At first his appearance provoked an uneasy silence among patrons and proprietor. Then, gradually accustomed to his appearance, someone dared to ask, "Want to wet your throat, Eminence?" "No," he replied, "nor my feet either."

He once remarked about an unpopular and officious assistant, "Poor fellow, if he had been present at the Creation, our dear God would have had to do it his way."

Following his election as Pope he looked

at himself in a mirror and, beholding the squat form and face and overly generous ears which made his appearance less than that of a dream pope, he said, "O Lord, this man is going to be a disaster on television."

He poked fun at his excessive girth. On the occasion of his first visit to the august French Academy, an aide asked for his impressions. Still sitting in his seat, he looked about and murmured, "Beautiful, beautiful." Then, struggling to get out of the chair, added, "Unhappily the chairs are only wide enough for a demi-nuncio."

Once at a diplomatic reception he was engaged in conversation with the chief rabbi of Paris. As they started into the dining room, the rabbi said, "After you, Excellency." "No, no," he replied, gently steering the rabbi forward. "The Old Testament, before the New."

And one final one. While Nuncio in Paris he overheard a carpenter whose work was not going well loose a stream of blasphemies, some highly original and in thorough keeping with the volatility of the French temperament. Hoping that the tirade would simply pass, he tried to close his study door but to no avail. Finally, he confronted the erupting carpenter. "What is all this, my good man? Why can't you just say the usual word (four-lettered in English and five in Italian) like everyone else and get on with your work?" ("I'll be happy to send you the word if you request the information.")

**Vatican Radio Defends Communion Decree**

Vatican City [RNS] — Vatican Radio, an arm of the Holy See, devoted considerable time to a Jesuit's defense of two Vatican congregations which agreed to terminate the practice of admitting children to First Communion before their First Confessions.

An article by Father Jean Galot, SJ, in *Civiltà Cattolica* deals with some objections against a return to an older practice of having children make their First Confession before being admitted to their First Communion.

Two Vatican bodies, the Congregation for the Clergy, headed by Cardinal John Wright, an American, and the Congregation for the Sacraments, headed by

**BISHOP RESIGNS**

Washington, D.C. [RNS] — The resignation due to poor health of Archbishop Robert J. Dwyer of Portland, Ore., was accepted by Pope Paul who in turn appointed Bishop Cornelius M. Power of Yakima, Wash., to the Portland See.

Cardinal Antonio Samore, have denied a request by U.S. bishops for a two-year extension of an experimental program of preparing children for First Communion before Confession.

The Vatican decree, issued last July, was intended to end the experiment, which was being carried out in about half the 160 U.S. dioceses.

The rationale behind the experimental program is that children can understand the Eucharist at an earlier age than that needed to grasp the concept of sin.

Father Galot, a professor of theology at Rome's Jesuit-run Gregorian University, noted that "the risk of arousing in the child guilt complexes or torment" has often been "invoked" as a reason to oppose the "traditional" practice of Confession before First Communion.

"But this risk," the Jesuit argues, "can be present at different ages and does not derive from the Sacrament of Penance and the preparation leading to it."

"In some cases," he explains, "the darkness of the confessional box, the feeling of fear, the severity of the confessor have produced psychological shocks in some children, reactions of aversion, and sometimes an 'allergy' to confession."

"Therefore," the theologian concludes, "it is very important to provide familiar surroundings for this Sacrament, in which the warm welcome of the priest and the solicitude of the forgiveness he pronounces can be manifested in a climate of serenity and trust."

"If these surroundings are guaranteed, one cannot see why there should be any fear of shock or distress. On the contrary, the child will appreciate the Sacrament in which the warmth of human welcome expresses the mystery of Divine goodness and he will find himself at ease."

A statement issued by the U.S. Catholic Conference, last September, pointed out that no child may be required to receive the Sacrament of Penance as an "absolute prerequisite" for receiving First Communion.



**U.S. Official Received By Pope**  
Pope Paul VI greets U.S. Treasury Secretary George Schultz during a private audience at the Vatican. [RNS]

**Pontiff Sees God in Comet**

Vatican City [RNS] — Pope Paul, after a recent viewing of the comet Kohoutek, urged the faithful to read in the "immense page" of the starry universe "the ineffable name" of its sovereign Creator. Speaking to the crowd in St.

Peter's Square at noon on Jan. 13, the Pope disclosed that "one evening recently" he had gone up to the roof of his Vatican residence and "with the aid of a simple pair of binoculars" had looked "intensely" at the "space wanderer."

He said he found it to be "nothing special," simply "a luminous point" but that as he was scanning the night sky over Rome, he "admired the boundless scene of the darkened heavens, dotted with scintillating lights, and adorned with the jewel of the passing comet," whose arrival had been "preannounced with infallible chronometric precision."

"Once again," he added, "we experienced the sense of the cosmic mystery — boundless space, time without end, an incalculable sidereal scenery with perfect and inexhaustible movements, fearfully profound silence."

"And yet, there is the reaction of the human spirit: 'I am, I think, I understand, I know.' We know that this immense page of the universe bears a sovereign name, a name stamped all over it, an omnipotent name, the ineffable name of its Creator."

**The Bishop's Public Appointments**



**February**

- 5—Priests' Council, Becket Hall — 10:30 a.m.
- 7—North Region Conference, General Assembly, Church of the Annunciation — 7:41 p.m.
- 10—Confirmation, St. Louis Church, Pittsford — 2 and 4:30 p.m.
- 12—Non-Metropolitan Regional Coordinators' Meeting, St. Mary's of the Lake Parish, Watkins Glen — 10 a.m.
- 12—Pastoral Council Formation Committee Meeting, St. Stephen's Church, Geneva — 7:30 p.m.
- 13—Visitation, Monastery of St. John of the Cross, Waverly — 6:30 p.m.
- 15—Joint Agenda Committee Meeting of Priests' Council,

Diocesan Sisters' Council and Interdepartmental staff — 10:30 a.m.

- 16—Celebration of Eucharist and Homily, Northeast Region Religion Teachers' Workshop, Mercy High School — 3:30 p.m.
- 20—Visitation, DeSales High School, Geneva — 10 a.m.
- 21—Interdepartmental Staff Meeting, Becket Hall — 9 a.m.
- 22—Lecture for Students, St. Bernard's Seminary — 10 a.m.
- 23—Radio Message, Family Rosary Network — 7 p.m.
- 24—Celebration of Eucharist and Homily, Monroe Community College Residence of Chaplain — 8 p.m.
- 26—Visitation, Bishop Kearney High School — 10 a.m.