

Taking humor seriously

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

Jesuit Father Arthur McGovern likes to joke with God. He's also been known to have Massgoers laughing heartily during his Sunday homily. And he admits that he catches himself smiling while celebrating Mass from time to time.

Father McGovern, you see, is a man who takes his humor very seriously.

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The priest, who teaches philosophy at the Jesuits' University of Detroit, is a strong believer in the value of humor. Father McGovern brings humor into his prayer life, into his classroom and into his relationships.

"Long ago," Father McGovern said in a recent interview, "the conviction came to me that what we are to preach is good news. That's what the Gospel means — good news." But, he said, "it's easy to lose sight of the good news," to stress the negative.

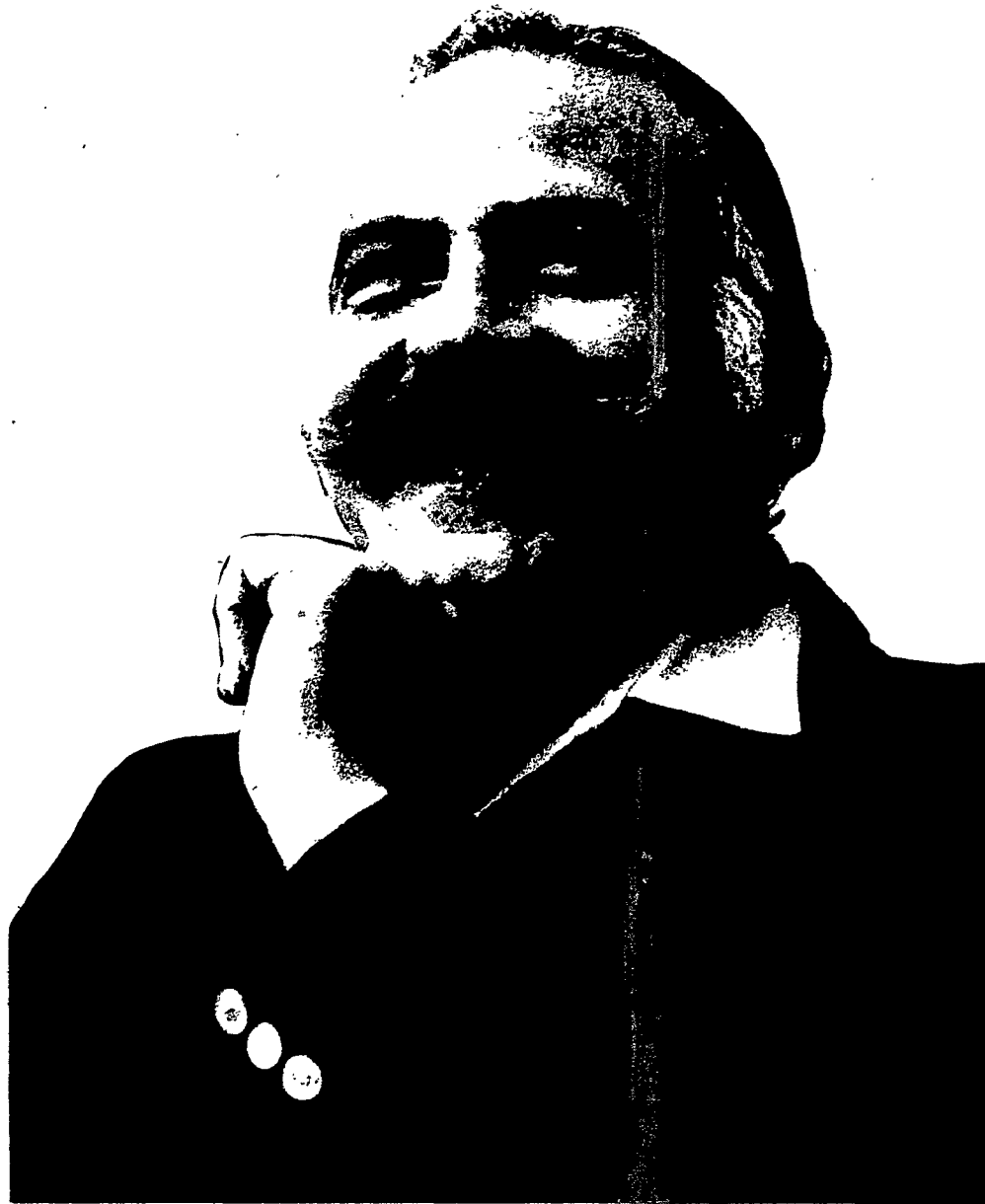
A vital part of the good news is humor, believes Father McGovern. Even when pondering a subject as deep as the meaning of life, he says, humor has a definite role.

Father McGovern defined "meaning" in life as "something that gives purpose and value to what we do and who we are." He added that "meaning in life can be different for different people and it can change over time for individuals."

In our search for meaning, said Father McGovern, it is easy to lose perspective, to lose a necessary balance.

"Overseriousness can kill the meaning of life," he thinks. "Humor is a healthy corrective. It is not opposed to the seriousness of life. But we have to learn to laugh at our own failures and flaws. Otherwise things get out of balance."

The way Father McGovern approaches humor, he said, is to



As the gentleman above apparently realizes, 'being too serious can kill the meaning of life. We have to learn to laugh at our own failures and flaws. Otherwise things get out of balance.'

laugh at himself. He quickly noted that he knows how difficult it is for people to laugh at themselves. But when they do, he said, they are expressing a form of humility, a recognition that the world does not revolve around them.

Without a sense of humor, added Father McGovern, "you focus on failures, defeats, lack of fulfillment. That leads to (spiritual) death."

But beyond being a "corrective," the Detroit priest feels that humor can be a great aid in developing one's spirituality, or relationship with God.

"My own spirituality is simple," Father McGovern said. "What gives life I need to build. What destroys life I need to challenge. Humor serves both. Humor is a way of finding delight in what is good. And it's an effective way of challenging what needs to be challenged."

Much of maintaining one's spirituality, continued Father McGovern, involves maintaining one's perspective. That's where humor comes in. The key, he

feels, is never "losing our seriousness about our vocation but never taking ourselves too seriously."

"I bring humor into my prayer," the priest said. He explained that we "ought to present ourselves to God as we are. The relationship ought to be with God as it is with your closest friend."

If you're angry with God, you tell him you're angry, Father McGovern said. And if you feel like joking with God, joke with him.

Father McGovern said he often kids his philosophy students. And he uses humor to illustrate points in his homilies.

Father McGovern, by the way, is a specialist in Marxist philosophy.

"Sounds pretty serious, doesn't it?" he asked as he twisted his face into a frown.

Then he smiled.

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)

A slight adjust

By David Gibson
NC News Service

Mark's team lost the soccer game. But the game's excitement and fun wouldn't soon be forgotten. Up to the bitter end the game could have gone either way.

It was a warm spring day. Mark and his parents got into the car for the ride home.

In years past, the car would have been full, since Mark's brother and sister frequently attended his games, as he attended their basketball games and swim meets. But over the past three years they had gone off to college. In 10 days Mark too would be a high school graduate.

During the ride home Mark's mother and father were preoccupied by identical thoughts. Their lives were about to meet a big change. Mark's graduation meant that in the future they would not be needed by their children in quite the way they were needed in the past.

As they pulled into the driveway of their old and much-loved home, Mark's parents felt nostalgic. They were going to miss the lifestyle that included so much of Mark, so much of his soccer stardom.

Mark's mother stepped out of the car. Looking up at the house she wondered for the umpteenth

Viewing the 1

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Long ago a question tormented a man we now know only as Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes. He asked: What is life all about?

Qoheleth's story reflects the human struggle to understand life's meaning — a struggle as real now as it was many centuries ago.

In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, this man dramatized his search by posing as Solomon, the king who had everything a heart could desire: wealth, power, wisdom, pleasure.

But he found that the answer to his question about life's meaning could not be found in those things. In spite of all his riches, he concluded: "Vanity of vanities...all things are vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

We remember Qoheleth, much as we remember Job with his great questions about human suffering. Their questions are our questions.

In his musings, Qoheleth considered, one by one, all the things which should have brought him

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