

Christ's fools

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"Part of my ministry is freeing people," he said. "A lot of times people come in with anxieties and burdens. They get so caught up with what I'm doing they are free for that time. It frees them from anxieties and worries — just like Jesus did."

Yet many people have a hard time seeing clowning as ministry, acknowledged Father David Mura, pastor of the Holy Apostles/St. Andrew's Cluster in Rochester, and alter ego of "Bosco" for the past 16 years.

"Sometimes we get so caught up in the theology, we forget that theology only came after the fact," Father Mura noted. "What the clown does is lead us to the humanity of Christ, and the humor of Christ."

Clown ministry can be used not only to comfort, but also to educate, to get people to see symbols and beliefs in different ways, to help bring the Bible to life and to enhance faith, Father Mura noted. Moreover, he observed, the church has a history of recognizing those who become "fools on Christ's account," as St. Paul described them in 1 Corinthians 4:10.

One of the titles in the Eastern Rite litany of the saints, for example, is "Fool of Christ's sake," Father Mura pointed out.

Indeed, there has even been a scholarly study of the fool in Catholic and Orthodox churches: John Seward's 1980 book, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*.

"The holy fools for Christ's sake imitate and proclaim the God-child wiser than the Magi, the boy in the temple more learned than greybeards and doctors, divine wisdom at the pillar mocked and laughed at by men," Seward wrote. "Folly for Christ's sake as a specific charism in the Church dramatizes the vocation of us all: to be conformed to the Incarnate Son of God, to renounce self-will and false wisdom, to accept the folly of infancy and the cross, to be God's trusting little ones and so shame the worldly wise."

Seward traces the idea of the holy fool back to the old Testament prophets, then through the Gospel story and St. Paul's writings, to the many Christian holy men and women who behaved in clownish ways for God's sake.

Fools for Christ's sake, Seward argues, have a charism to "play at being mad. The fool for Christ is a sacred jester, clown or mimic." The inspiration for their actions, he continues, "is identity with Christ crucified, participation in the Lord's poverty, mockery, humiliation, nakedness and self-emptying."

Father Mura pointed out that the clown symbolically dies while putting on makeup, and thus "puts his old self away and becomes a new creation, all for the sake of lifting people up."

"There's a relationship between humor and spirituality. Humor and humility are closely related," Cal ("Zorba, the Clown") Samra observed in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. Samra is author of *The Joyful Christ: the Healing Power of Humor*.

"Humor is healing," continued Samra, president of the Portage, Mich.-based Fellowship of Merry Christians, Inc. "Joy is healing. If Jesus was a healer, we have to assume he was joyful, he must have had a sense of humor."

Indeed, to be truly effective the clown minister must be a person of faith, Donohue noted.

"That person has to be rooted in faith," Donohue said. "(He or she) must be willing to be used by God however, wherever God is going to send them. And the person has to be a person of love. It's because of the love they have received that they want to pass it on."

But clown ministry need not be overt-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Sister Marshall draws a cartoon character on Jared's hand during a visit to pediatrics.



It takes Sister Marshall two to three hours to apply her makeup and get into her clown outfit to become 'Wonderment the Clown.'



Sister Marshall comforts a patient.

ly church-related, acknowledged Ruth Turk, a teacher at BOCES #1 in Fairport who has used clowning with her students, and has even written a book called *Classroom Clowning*.

Turk — a parishioner at St. Joseph's Parish in Rush who goes by the clown name "Nutsy" — said that in teaching clowning to troubled youths, "I'm teaching the kids to recognize the gentle side of themselves, and when they go to the hospital, to bring joy and gentleness to people."

Because she works for a public school, Turk said she cannot directly discuss the faith aspects of clown ministry with her

students. But she is able to convey subtle messages without preaching.

"Love one another, be kind to one another, be gentle, this is what Christ told us," Turk said. "Without mentioning Christ, we're trying to share that kindness."

Turk — who gained some of her ideas about clown ministry from Father Mura and, in turn, taught the workshop through which Sister Marshall discovered clowning — acknowledged that clown ministry seems not to be as popular in the diocese today as it was a few years ago. But, she said, there seems to be an upswing in interest. And she plans to teach a class on clowning for junior high students in her parish's vacation Bible school this summer.

Clown ministry has indeed experienced cycles of varying popularity over the years, Father Mura acknowledged.

The most recent wave began in the 1960s when Lutheran Minister Floyd Shaffer, among others, began promoting the idea of clown ministry. That surge led to a spate of people proclaiming themselves clown ministers, to workshops around the country, and to such organizations as the Virginia Beach-based Phoenix Power and Light Company, Inc., on whose board of directors Father Mura serves. The organization

Clown ministers seek strength through prayer

Over the years, a number of clown prayers have developed. The following is the prayer Sister Marie Marshall, RSM, says as she puts on her makeup to become "Wonderment, the Clown."

Dear Lord,

Help me to create more laughter than tears; to disperse more happiness than gloom; and to spread more cheer than despair.

Never let me grow so dull that I fail to see the wonder in a child's eyes or the twinkle in the face of the aged.

Help me to laugh at my own foolishness and to reach out to others.

May I share the power of faith, the strength of hope, and the joy of love, so that pain, sin and death will be transformed. In the name of him who turns darkness into light.

Amen.

links clowns, mimes, storytellers, dancers and puppeteers, and stages annual workshops on the basic techniques and theology of these arts.

Janet Litherland, who has written two books about clown ministry — *The Clown Ministry Handbook* and *Everything New and Who's Who in Clown Ministry* — said she has seen a change in the nature of clown ministry during the span between publication of her 1982 book and the second book in 1993.

"Education and training is real important (now)," Litherland explained. "Back then, a lot of people would put on the costume and do it. Now they try to understand what the clown is really about before going out."

Clown ministers now also are dealing in their routines with topics they might not have in past, including such subjects as family issues, political correctness and the spread of weaponry, Litherland reported.

But beyond social, scholarly and theological musings, the reality of clown ministry is bringing joy to people, Samra observed.

"They have a ministry," Samra said, "to lift people's spirits up in hospitals, in nursing homes, wherever there are people who are suffering and need to have their spirits lifted."