

Fr. Perozich comments —

Fr. Scalia does it again, fleshing out language and the depth of the story with his insights.

A local priest in the diocese of Venice asked me how I felt about a certain man being elevated to the college of cardinals. I replied that I think that the new cardinal worked very hard to get there, taking all the steps necessary to promote whatever those in charge wanted him to do for them, and this is his reward.

I added, while it is nice for him, it does not advance the salvation of souls for the rest of us, so I continue to teach, guide, and sanctify as Jesus ordained me to do.

Not a few people express their surprise, outrage, and anger on the advancement to power of people in the church, in politics, business, education, and other spheres. Such power will allow them to impose or at least pontificate their ideas on the rest of us, and in some cases it may affect our lives, while in other cases their frequent and proud opinions will be left out there in the ether to dissipate, while God's eternal Truth can make His home in our souls.

In the church Jesus has given us men as priests, bishops, and a pope to assist in our salvation while the Lord Himself is present to each of us. The institutionalization of the expression of the offices has acquired a **worldly** character; Jesus remains as our divine Guide, the Good Shepherd.

Matt 16:26, What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

Fr. Scalia shows us how to live in humility and truth in order to forgo worldly honors at the risk of forfeiture of life.

- **Humility is the awareness of the truth about ourselves – the ability to see ourselves as we are. It's the power to see ourselves in the proper proportion, neither greater nor lesser than we really are. This sense of proportion is necessary for humor. We laugh when something strikes us as out-of-proportion or incongruous. Humility is a sense of proportion and therefore leads to laughter. It prompts us to take our Lord seriously and ourselves lightly.**
- **So, this lesson on humility calls attention to a related virtue, which Saint Thomas Aquinas calls **mirth**.**

- *Christian **mirth** is a fruit of trust. If we do not trust God, then we have no sense of proportion. Without trust in him, we see ourselves as in charge and responsible for everything. And there's nothing funny about that. The man who trusts in God can both weep for his sins and laugh at his imperfections. He knows that God is in control, and that he is not. So, he can afford to be lighthearted.*
- *To keep from being overwhelmed by trials, we must have a sense of humor. Without it, our engagement in the spiritual combat will quickly make us brittle, bitter, and resentful. We ought to be warriors, but joyful ones.*
- *The man who takes himself too seriously leaves no room for God and for that reason God will have no room for him. But the man who sees himself in the proper proportion depends entirely on God and cultivates a carefree, mirthful spirit.*

The Seriousness of Humor

By [Fr. Paul D. Scalia](#) SUNDAY, AUGUST 28, 2022

At the risk of seeming disrespectful or irreverent, I'd like to propose that the parable in today's Gospel is, well, *funny*. More to the point, it's meant to be funny. Not "funny" in the sense of silly or trivial. Obviously, it contains a serious teaching about the foundational virtue of humility. But you can effectively deliver an important teaching in a funny way. And that's what our Lord does in this Gospel.

At dinner in the home of a leading Pharisee, Jesus notices how the other guests jockey and maneuver for the best – that is, the most prominent – position at table. Apparently, the adage that "seating is everything" was as true then as now. Perhaps we can imagine a smile

begin to form on his face as he gives them a lesson on exactly how they should get the best seat.

It's a curious approach he gives them. They should take the lowest seat at dinner, not out of genuine humility but so that they can be raised up, told to come up higher and look good to others. Now, how do we understand our Lord's instructions about seating? Either he is giving very cynical social advice – *If you really want to look good at dinner parties, let me tell you how it's done* – or. . .he's up to something else. Probably the latter.

This parable is unlike any other. It's not a hypothetical story about a shepherd, farmer, or fisherman. It's about the guests right in front of him. Point is, he's *teasing* them about their prideful social climbing. Then, having teased them a bit – perhaps even having brought them to laugh at themselves – he then turns the lesson around and gives the instruction such people need to hear: *Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*

So, this lesson on humility calls attention to a related virtue, which Saint Thomas Aquinas calls ***mirth***. It points to the importance of humor and levity in the life of faith. Again, this doesn't mean being flippant, trivializing things, or treating the sacred with disrespect. Nor does it mean the kind of humor that gets laughs at someone else's expense. **It's rather the ability to laugh at the incongruity of things, at the ridiculousness of human affairs, and even at ourselves.**

The use of humor to teach humility is apt, as their common root word indicates. Humility and humor both derive from *humus* – meaning earth or soil. They're earthy qualities. Only the humble can laugh. Saint Philip Neri is called the Apostle of Joy, in part because of his use of humor with his directees. Unfortunately, his humor is often cast as just fooling around, as though he were the class clown of the Communion of Saints. In fact, his humor had the serious purpose of teaching humility.



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The proud have no humor. They snicker and sneer. They make fun of people or ridicule things. But that's cruelty, not humor. The proud lack that sense of proportion that makes a sense of humor possible. They consider themselves greater than they are and see themselves as the center of everything. This also makes them boring. The proud exalt themselves and trivialize the Lord. For that reason, they will be humbled, which won't be funny.

This all may seem out of keeping with the seriousness of faith. But Scripture tells us that there is a time not only to weep but also to laugh. (cf. Eccl 3:4) Saint Thomas considers the lack of mirth a vice. He observes that the *man without mirth. . . is burdensome to others.*

In her characteristically winsome manner, Saint Theresa of Avila prayed, “Lord, deliver me from sour-faced saints.”

Christian mirth is a fruit of trust. If we do not trust God, then we have no sense of proportion. Without trust in him, we see ourselves as in charge and responsible for everything. And there’s nothing funny about that. The man who trusts in God can both weep for his sins and laugh at his imperfections. He knows that God is in control, and that he is not. So, he can afford to be lighthearted.

This levity also guards against discouragement. The struggle to live the faith and raise families in the culture of death provides many opportunities for discouragement. To keep from being overwhelmed by trials, we must have a sense of humor. Without it, our engagement in the spiritual combat will quickly make us brittle, bitter, and resentful. We ought to be warriors, but joyful ones.

Clearly, this issue of humor, levity, and mirth is gravely serious business. It’s necessary not just for the pleasantness of daily life, but for the success of the spiritual life. **The man who takes himself too seriously leaves no room for God and for that reason God will have no room for him. But the man who sees himself in the proper proportion depends entirely on God and cultivates a carefree, mirthful spirit.**

***Image:** *The Meal in the House of the Pharisee (Le repas chez le pharisien)* by James Tissot, c. 1890 [Brooklyn Museum]

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