A CHARISM INSEPARABLE FROM CATHOLIC FAITH

Hans Urs Von Balthasar on Humour

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THERE IS A WELL-KNOWN PROVERB attributed to St Francis de Sales: 'A sad saint is a bad saint'. Joy is one of the fundamental aspects of Christian faith. But what about a sense of humour, or laughter as its most obvious expression? Are these not as important as joy in Christian life? It is not easy to answer this question. There has long been a notion that Jesus himself never laughed. The Gospels do not say that he laughed or even smiled—while we do read that he wept (John 11:35). At least partly because of this, most religious paintings tend to portray him as a sombre Saviour. The question of whether Jesus ever laughed was taken quite seriously at times (even with deadly consequences in the famous novel by Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*).[1] All of this shows that there has existed a deeply rooted notion that faith and humour are incompatible.[2] However, is this really the case?

Going back to Jesus himself in the Gospels, some of the parables he tells and some of the responses he gives to the Pharisees do suggest a sense of humour.[3] Further, it cannot be christologically correct to say that Jesus never laughed, as he was fully human (that is, if we consider humour and laughter as an essential feature of being human). Also, if we take a look at the history of the saints, we can find many saints with a sense of humour, if sometimes a grim one.[4] We have St Lawrence, the

[1] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, translated by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 2004).
[2] See Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), 64–74.
[3] See Leonard Greenspoon, 'Humor in the New Testament', at http://global.oup.com/obso/focus/focus_on_ humor_new_testament/, accessed 1 March 2017.
[4] See Jacques Roi, *L'Humour des saints* (Paris: Cerf, 1980); James Martin, *Between Heaven and Mirth* (New York: Harper One, 2011); Michael A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 2015 [1997]).

third-century martyr, for example, who is supposed to have said, as he was being burned on a gridiron, 'turn me over. I'm already cooked on this side'.[5] Pope Francis once said that he offers St Thomas More's prayer for good humour every day.[6] Recently, at least on a pastoral level, the importance of humour for spiritual life seems to have been acknowledged, at least by some.[7] In 'serious' discussions of Christian theology, however, it does not yet receive the amount of attention it deserves, considering its potential power to fight against evil, arrogance and despair.[8]

One influential theologian who has actually mentioned the importance of humour in his writings is Hans Urs von Balthasar. He did not write extensively on this topic, but still his comments are worth examining. By placing them in the wider context of his theology and his 'tragic' view of Christianity I hope to explore the neglected question of what humour is in a theological sense and why it can be significant in Christian faith (or, more specifically, in Roman Catholic faith).[9]

Hans Urs von Balthasar on Humour

Balthasar writes that humour is 'a mysterious but unmistakable charism inseparable from Catholic faith'.[10] This statement appears in his book *Der Antirömische Affekt* (literally, 'the anti-Roman feeling', published in English as *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*), in which he discusses the place of the papacy within the Church. At the beginning of this book, Balthasar declares that he wrote it to show that,

[5] Ambrose, *De officiis*, 1.41.207.

[6] This prayer was not, in fact, written by St Thomas More, but by Thomas Henry Basil Webb, a soldier killed at the battle of Cambrai in 1917. The prayer concludes: 'Give me a sense of humour, Lord, / Give me the power to see a joke, / To get some happiness from life / And pass it on to other folk'. See '"Give Me a Good Digestion, Lord"—More's Apocryphal Prayer', *Moreana*, 9/36 (December 1972), 93–96, available, with other articles on the subject and More's genuine prayer (in fact he prays 'to estew light folyshe myrth and gladnesse'), at http://www.moreana.org/uk/revue_moreana.asp?rub=14&idsrub=185. See also Pope Francis, Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2014, n. 12, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141222_curia-romana.html#_ftnref14.

[7] See, for example, Martin, *Between Heaven and Mirth*.

[8] See Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997); Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Continuum, 1994); Ignacio L. Götz, *Faith, Humor, and Paradox* (Westport: Praeger, 2002); Hugh S. Pyper, 'Humour', in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, edited by Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pyper (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 314–315.

[9] No research in depth has yet been done on this topic. See the summary by Fergus Kerr, 'Comments: Humour in the Catholic Church', *New Blackfriars*, 89/1023 (2008), 497–498.

[10] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, translated by Andrée Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), 330 (subsequent references in the text).

> … there is a deep-seated anti-Roman attitude [a hostility towards the papacy] within the Catholic Church … and that this attitude has not only sociological and historical grounds but also a theological basis and that it has to be overcome again and again by the community of the Church (1).

Throughout the book Balthasar talks about the 'multi-dimensional reality' of the Church (20), 'the force-fields that bear upon the Church' (15–16) and 'the network of tensions in the Church' (18). In his view, the Roman Catholic Church has been a tension of forces from the very beginning, making a '*contest* within the Church herself' inevitable, which could be 'mostly against the Petrine principle, but it could just as well be against pneumaticism or theological rationalism or the claimed dominance of exegesis' (341). (He even notes that the word '*contest*', which has *con* [Latin, 'together'] in it, itself implies that it is a 'community-creating act' [342].)

In short, according to Balthasar, the tensions within the Church are not necessarily signs of spiritual shortcomings or flaws, but rather constitutive of a Church which, since its very foundation, has been characterized by an interplay of forces. In his ecclesiology, it is the different subjective principles represented by the Virgin Mary, Peter, John and the other figures surrounding Jesus that form the unity of the Church in their mutuality, interaction and tension. (In this structure, even though the papacy is no doubt a crucial element in the Church, it is not placed 'above' the Church, nor is the mystery of the Church ever reduced to the papacy.)

It is in this large ecclesial context that Balthasar spares several pages to comment on the significance of humour for Roman Catholic faith in his discussion of what he calls the 'Catholic "And"' (that is, the 'and' that links '"faith and works", "nature and grace", "reason and revelation"') (329).[11] Humour is above all regarded as a *balanced* attitude or view set among different tensions and forces. He starts by criticizing 'the dogmatism of those who cannot let go of their own selves', for such an attitude is 'the opposite of the courage of those who opt for the catholicity of truth, focusing their existence on the concrete Christ' (328). He then goes on to note that every heresy is nothing other than 'a part claiming to be the whole' (328), in other words, a phenomenon lacking in a sense of balance. In this

Humour is above all … a balanced attitude

[11] Balthasar is quoting Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*.

context, he critiques 'the *soli* of the Reformation—*sola fide, sola scriptura, sola gratia, soli Deo gloria*' by contrast with the 'Catholic "And"', saying that such formulations ironically fail to acknowledge God's sovereignty, despite their very sincere wish to defend it: 'they are forbidding God to be anything other than himself (man, for instance, if he should so wish), to be anywhere else but in heaven …' (329).

From time to time, Catholics also fall into their weaknesses, but, Balthasar writes,

> The Catholic … has enough saints in his Church to inspire him with a genuine sense of God's divinity.
>
> But the saints are never the kind of killjoy spinster aunts who go in for faultfinding and lack all sense of humor …. For humor is a mysterious but unmistakable charism inseparable from Catholic faith. (329–330)

He associates a sense of humour with the balance that makes 'the Catholic … pliable, flexible, yielding, because [his] firmness is not based on himself and his own opinion but on God' (330). Humour is an important quality which distinguishes genuine faith from the fanaticism of 'faultfinders, malicious satirists, grumblers, carping critics, full of bitter scorn, know-it-alls who think they have the monopoly of infallible judgment …' (330).

When it comes to the specific examples that Balthasar cites of humorous saints, it is tempting to think that their sense of humour is an important reason for his admiration for certain authors who are also sources of inspiration for his theology. Balthasar mentions St Ignatius of Loyola (affirming his Jesuit roots),[12] St Teresa of Ávila[13] and St Thérèse of Lisieux[14]

[12] Apparently St Ignatius had a dry wit. According to an early biography, when they were imprisoned by the Inquisition, Ignatius and his companions were told 'that they would not have brought so much trouble upon themselves if their Discourses had less of Novelty in them. "I did not think", Ignatius repli'd with a grave and modest Aire, "that it had been a novelty amongst Christians, to speak of Jesus Christ".' (Dominique Bouhours, *The Life of St. Ignatius, Founder of the Society of Jesus* [London: Henry Hills, 1686], 84) See also Roi, *L'Humour des saints*, 53–68.

[13] St Teresa's humour is well known. 'Once, when she was travelling to one of her convents, St Teresa of Ávila was knocked off her donkey and fell into the mud, injuring her leg. "Lord", she said, "you couldn't have picked a worse time for this to happen. Why would you let this happen?" And the response in prayer that she heard was, "That is how I treat my friends". Teresa answered, "And that is why you have so few of them!"' (Quoted in Martin, *Between Heaven and Mirth*, 68–85.)

[14] St Thérèse's spirituality can be characterized by spiritual 'childhood' (as her name, St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, suggests). Her writings are full of a childlike sense of play. For example, she writes, 'O little Childe Jesus! My own treasure, I abandon myself to your divine whims, I wish for no other joy but that of making you smile.' (Quoted by Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of*

(showing his love of Carmelite spirituality) as examples of saints whose spiritualities show flashes of humour. Among Christian writers in whose work he finds humour, Balthasar mentions the French authors he adores, Paul Claudel and Georges Bernanos (as the first Catholics in France to be completely free of Jansenist gloom), as well as Charles Péguy. Unsurprisingly, he takes the liberty of 'appropriating for the Catholics that humour of C. S. Lewis' (333) and refers to G. K. Chesterton as the author whose writings show that 'only the Catholic form guarantees the miraculous quality of being, the freedom, the sense of being a child, of adventure, the resilient, energizing paradox of existence' (331).

We should also mention Mozart in this context. After declaring that the saints never lack a sense of humour, Balthasar briefly mentions in a parenthesis that 'Karl Barth who so loved and understood Mozart' (329–330) should not be regarded as humourless either, implying that the appreciation of Mozart's music indicates a sense of humour—despite the fact that Barth could not abide the Catholic 'And'.[15] Considering the theological importance of Mozart for Balthasar, as well as for Barth,[16] this remark is worth noting. For Balthasar, music is a meeting place of opposites (whether they are the human and the divine, what can and cannot be spoken, or time and eternity) as well as, in Mozart particularly, an art-form which can contain the whole within a fragment.[17] Theologically speaking, Balthasar sees something similar in sense of humour and in the ability to appreciate symphonic music, the classic example of which, for him, is Mozart. In Balthasar's words:

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, by Doris Stock, 1789

Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity, translated by Donald Nichols, Anne English Nash and Dennis D. Martin [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992], 291.)

[15] The reformed theologian Karl Barth himself was deeply aware of the significance of a sense of humour in Christian faith, which would be a topic worth exploring in itself. See for example, Daniel L. Migliore, 'Karl Barth: Theologian with a Sense of Humor', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin,* 7/3 (1986), 276–279. It has often been noted from the evidence of his personal letters that Mozart himself had a strong, if sometimes silly and rude, sense of humour. See Robert Spaethling, *Mozart's Letters, Mozart's Life: Selected Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

[16] See Philip McCosker, '"Blessed Tension": Barth and Von Balthasar on the Music of Mozart', *The Way*, 44/4 (October 2005), 81–95.

[17] See McCosker, 'Blessed Tension', 91–92.

> Christian truth is symphonic. Symphony by no means implies a sickly sweet harmony lacking all tension. Great music is always dramatic: there is a continual process of intensification, followed by a release of tension at a higher level …. Mozart imparts something winged, buoyant, internally vibrant to his simplest melody … so that the power that enables us to recognise him after only a few bars seems to flow from an inexhaustible reservoir of blessed tension ….[18]

To appreciate, and compose, symphonic music requires an ability to hear the melody as a whole while enjoying its inherent tension. Like sense of humour, it requires balance.

Balthasar and the 'Tragic' Christian Existence

All of this might simply be brushed aside as a series of random, idiosyncratic comments inserted between 'serious' discussions about the structure of the Church, but the names to which Balthasar refers show a distinctive preference for certain authors which is also clear from his other writings. Further, the context where his comments are placed and his understanding of humour as indicative of balance among tensions or forces suggest that these comments can be integrated into his wider theology. This notion of balance is an important characteristic of Balthasar's way of thinking, which can be seen almost everywhere in his writings.

There is, however, a paradox here. For despite his appreciation of the humour of the saints, it is not comedy but tragedy that deeply influences Balthasar's theology, and it is in this context that his comments on humour are worth examining. Balthasar is regarded as a pioneer in the area of theological engagement with tragedy.[19] While there is a long-standing view that Christianity is fundamentally anti-tragic,[20] for Balthasar Christianity actually sustains tragedy. He explores the tragic dimension of Christian existence in various places. For example, he writes:

[18] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 15.

[19] One of the major theologians who have followed him regarding this matter is certainly Donald MacKinnon. Balthasar's approach to tragedy has been critically examined by scholars such as Ben Quash and Kevin Taylor. See Ben Quash, 'Christianity as Hyper-Tragic', in *Facing Tragedies*, volume 2, edited by Christopher Hamilton and others (Vienna: LIT, 2009), 77–88; Kevin Taylor, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero', in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, edited by Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 133–148: Kevin Taylor, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Question of Tragedy in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[20] George Steiner, for example, declares that tragedy is dead after Christianity, because hope is always present. In his words, 'Christianity is an anti-tragic vision of the world …. It leads the soul toward justice and resurrection …. Being a threshold to the eternal, the death of a Christian hero can be an occasion for sorrow but not for tragedy.' (*The Death of Tragedy* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1968], 331–332.)

> The Cross has removed the wall of division, as the Letter to the Ephesians says, in the tortured flesh of Christ. And yet this wall seems to be set up higher and more unsurmountably than ever. The Cross is judgement and therefore division: one thief is on the left, and another is on the right. But it is wholly dialectical: Jesus openly makes a promise to the thief on his right and says nothing to the thief on his left. But in order that the thief on the right may win the promise, Jesus unites himself in secret with the thief on the left in the solidarity of being rejected. *The Christian is exposed to this situation of being torn; and what other name than tragic could one find for this*, if one looks back to the Greek stage?[21]

Balthasar sees something fundamentally tragic in the 'in-between' state of the Christian. The Christian (and therefore the Church made of Christians as well) is characterized by paradoxical twofoldness in many ways. The Christian is a 'justified sinner', forgiven but not exempt from judgment, redeemed by Christ but still exposed to sin as long as he or she lives in this world. The Christian is a paradoxical being, constantly torn between the eternal truth of Christ and the laws of the world. For Balthasar, the Church is tragic 'in its innermost being', to the extent that it believes itself 'to be redeemed once and for all', when, in truth, the Church is different from its sinless archetype, the Virgin Mary (*Ecclesia Immaculata*).[22] As a matter of fact, Christians can be even more vulnerably exposed to sin than non-believers, exactly because only they can be tempted to believe that they are redeemed once and for all and to forget their paradoxical status as *simul iustus et peccator* or 'justified sinners'.

Forgiven but not exempt from judgment

At the same time we should never forget that the Christian can be called 'tragic' only in the sense of 'tragedy under grace',[23] for, despite the tragic dimension of the Christian existence, Christians always have the privilege of relating their own tragedy to the paschal mystery, thus receiving hope and consolation even in the midst of their suffering. In order to describe the Christian existence, indeed, Balthasar uses the image of the Christian stretched out on the cross, which is 'formed by the crisscrossing beams of the old aeon and the new'.[24] He writes:

[21] Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Tragedy and Christian Faith', in *Explorations in Theology*, volume 3, *Creator Spirit*, translated by Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 406. Italics added.
[22] Balthasar, 'Tragedy and Christian Faith', 409.
[23] This phrase is used by Reinhold Schneider, a German Catholic novelist admired by Balthasar. See Balthasar, *Tragedy under Grace: Reinhold Schneider on the Experience of the West*, translated by Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997).
[24] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, translated by Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1990), 264.

> The Church, and Christians, can occupy no determinate place within the *Mysterium Paschale*. Their place is neither in front of the Cross nor behind it, but on both its sides: without ever settling for the one vantage point or the other they look from now one, now the other, as ceaselessly directed. And yet *this see-saw* by no means lacks a support, because the Unique One is the identity of Cross and Resurrection, and Christian and ecclesial existence is disappropriated into him.[25]

This state described as a 'see-saw' is exactly what we have been calling the 'tragic' state of the Christian existence. The Christian's life is like a 'see-saw', alternating between the cross and the resurrection, death and life, the old aeon and the new, this world and the truth of Christ, but it is always supported by Christ Himself who went through both.

Balance in Christian Life

The metaphor of the 'see-saw' brings us back to humour as a balance among tensions (whether they are within the Church or between the Church and the secular world). On the one hand, Balthasar describes Christian existence, torn as it is between opposing forces, as 'tragic'. On the other hand, he says that a good Christian (or, more specifically, a good Catholic) should have a good sense of humour. The key to connecting these two points lies in his emphasis on the 'in-betweenness' of Christian existence, which is constantly located in tension.

Calvary, *by David Teniers the Elder, mid seventeenth century*

By placing Balthasar's comments on the humour of the saints in the context of his 'tragic' view of Christianity, I have tried to present a

[25] Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale,* 266. Italics added.

balanced discussion of the significance of humour itself, which has to be distinguished from mere frivolity or flippancy. As C. S. Lewis reminds us, the devil is pleased to see flippancy, because 'the habit of flippancy builds up around a man the finest armour-plating against the Enemy'—that is, the Enemy of the devil, or God.[26]

Balthasar's 'tragic' view of the Christian implies that suffering plays an important role in Christian life, so it helps us to see the significance of humour in the face of suffering. After all, it is exactly in the midst of suffering that the humour of saints stands out remarkably as 'a mysterious but unmistakable charism' (330). The saints we have mentioned above are also those who have suffered greatly.[27] In the suffering of the saints we often see joy based on trust in God in its purest form. Certainly humour is not the same as joy, but it would be safe to say that joy can be expressed in the form of humour.[28] We have to keep in mind that such coexistence of suffering and joy (not at all in a masochistic sense) is made possible because of the Christian's in-between state in relation to God and this world.

In the end, only with a full awareness of the paradoxical twofoldness inherent in the Christian existence can we really appreciate the value of humour to a Christian who confesses, as St Paul did, 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20) or is 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies …. So death is at work in us, but life in you.' (2 Corinthians 4: 10–12) Speaking of the existential status of saints, Balthasar writes:

> They do not turn their backs on the whole world in order to enjoy the rest of heaven in advance. Rather, they live a life of intense longing and move the world by the strength of that heaven that has first been granted to them and then closed to them. They hang crucified between this world and the beyond.[29]

In the last analysis, theologically speaking, having a good sense of humour means having a balanced view of life while loving both God and oneself,

[26] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001 [1942]), 56.
[27] It is not a coincidence that many of the saints and authors whom Balthasar mentions as examples of Christians with a sense of humour also happen to be those to whom he refers in the context of his theology of Christ's descent into hell.
[28] As Jacques Roi says, 'one can be joyous without having any sense of humour, but humour implies that the soul is in joy'. (See Roi, *L'Humour des saints*, 15.)
[29] Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, 212.

and God and creation. In daily life, this attitude takes the forms of humility, healthy optimism, and respect and compassion towards others, all of which are made possible by focusing our existence on God instead of ourselves.

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