

**Septuagesima**  
**February 17, 2019**  
**Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass**  
**of**  
**St. Thomas More Catholic Parish**  
**celebrated at**  
**St. Joseph Catholic Church**  
**116 Theodore St.**  
**Scranton, PA 18508**  
**Luke 6:17, 20-26**

The Beatitudes that we heard today are different than the ones we are accustomed to hearing from St. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5. The Beatitudes from Luke include some of the same descriptions of blessedness and attach some of the same promises that point forward to the life to come. But the Beatitudes recorded in St. Luke's Gospel also have an addendum. St. Luke records Jesus speaking of woe to those who are rich, woe to those who are full, woe to those who laugh, and woe to those of whom men speak well. Whereas St. Matthew's Beatitudes don't point to hell, those in the gospel according to St. Luke very much do.

It is easy to understand how Jesus here condemns falsehood and gluttony, selfishness and greed. But what's harder to understand is His condemnation of laughter, His promise that those who laugh now will before long mourn and weep. Therefore, I'm going to focus today on precisely what type of laughter He's talking about and how a dour humorlessness is not an objective of the Christian faith and life.

When we consider the question of laughter, we must first note how often we are commanded in the Scriptures to rejoice. Indeed, in the very Gospel we just heard, Jesus tells us to rejoice in the day that we suffer hatred, exclusion, and calumny on account of our devotion to the Lord, for our reward is great in heaven. Not without reason do we associate rejoicing with laughter, for the spiritual truth that is joy sees its corporeal manifestation in both tears and laughter. Many of us have experienced these two phenomena simultaneously, laughing through tears of joy in thanksgiving for blessings received, promises fulfilled, or even in potential disasters averted.

Couple this reality with St. Paul's insistence in his letter to the Philippians that we rejoice in all circumstances, a letter he wrote from prison, and we see that there are many instances when faithfulness to God is associated with laughter, even requires the laughter that is reflective of the joys our faith imparts.

Thus, we aren't aiming at a puritanical humorlessness that is suspicious of every occasion for laughter. Christians are not killjoys who are asked to see the dark side in everything. Nor are we to maintain a stoic lack of emotion no matter how happy we are for the gifts God has given us. Laughter is part of our lives and should be. It is in fact one of the gifts God has given us, a sign of the consolations God grants as we move through this vale of tears. However, we must ask why we are laughing and never whether we're allowed to laugh.

What Jesus rightly condemns is laughter at the expense of others. In the same way we associate laughter with joy, the opposite association we make is with mockery. Laughter can

also accompany making fun of people—for their differences, their disabilities, their weaknesses, their failures, even their death. Kicking people when they're down is the sort of laughter we want to avoid. Recalling St. Paul's ode to Love in I Corinthians, chapter 13, wherein he says that love does not rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the right, we can be certain that the misfortune of others should never be the occasion for our laughter. Our desire for our neighbors must be the same as the Lord's desire for them, that they be showered with blessings, most importantly their redemption in the Blood of the Lamb. Even if we sincerely desire people to suffer the consequences of their misdeeds in order that they turn from their wickedness and live, we should never rejoice at misfortune.

The distinction we're making here is between laughter, which is often good, and levity, which is always wicked. Levity is to treat something that is serious with contempt or carelessness, to be inconsiderate, even callous, about the gravity of the situation. Levity is not to laugh in the face of death, as so many martyrs have done, as St. Thomas More smiled and hugged his executioner on the scaffold. Levity is to laugh at death, as if it does not matter, as if the pain we must endure because of sin is meaningless. There are certain things we all know we shouldn't joke about. Levity takes such things and treats them as if they were the equivalent of the humorous absurdities of life. Laughter that is holy and good is something the Catholic can join in with, but levity causes us to cringe. Or even when it causes us to laugh, we know we shouldn't be laughing. We know we should sooner cry for sorrow.

The question we must ask with regard to laughter is whether it is of heaven or of hell. Is the devil laughing with us, even prompting us to laugh as others suffer and die? Or is God smiling upon our laughter because it is reflective of the joy that is inherent to a life of faith, hope, and charity? Does God smile on our laughter because He is the source of our joy, the joy we express through our laughter?

If our laughter is principally characterized by levity, then we have ample cause to mourn and weep, as we are preparing to enter hell, where mockery is all the devil and his minions know. In this case, we should heed the Lord's warning and begin to take seriously, rather than mock, the pain of our neighbors. But if our laughter is reflective of proper and godly rejoicing, it is a joy we must share with others, for it has as its end the eternal bliss we will know before the Throne of Grace.