

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Monday, 30th Week; St. Mary's Seminary

30th Week in Ordinary Time

St. Mary's Seminary

Oct. 29, 2018

Taking the Joy Out of Life?

Most of you are too young to remember Groucho Marx, so suffice it so say that he was a famous madcap comedian of the 20th century. And take it from me, until you've seen the Marx Brothers' movies, *A Night at the Opera* and *Duck Soup*, you are culturally deprived. At any rate, one day a priest spotted Groucho across the street. He rushed over to meet the famous comedian and said, "Thanks, Groucho, for bringing joy to life!" Groucho, scowling, replied, "And thank you, Father, for taking the joy *out* of life." Ouch!

In these days we are reading a portion of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians that exhorts us to conduct ourselves as authentic followers of Christ. At first glance, though, the rules he sets down seem strict, almost as if they are designed to take the joy out of life.

A Strict Code of Sexual Morality?

In today's reading, for example, St. Paul urges us to rid ourselves of immorality, impurity, and greedy pleasures. He even tells us to get rid of obscene, silly, and suggestive speech. It is probably this sort of teaching that people like Groucho object to the most. And, truth to tell, we can sometimes feel the same way. When we're with our friends in a congenial setting, it's all too easy to engage in the suggestive and silly talk that St. Paul condemns. We say to ourselves, "I'm only human! I'm just letting my hair down!" Such thinking, though, is part of a slippery slope that led us where we are today.

In his encyclical, *God Is Love*, Pope Benedict XVI addressed Groucho's point when

he wrote that many people accuse the Church of trying to destroy *eros*: “Just when the Creator’s gift of human sexuality offers the promise of happiness, the Church blows the whistle,” he wrote. And these days, given the abject moral failures of some church leaders, there’s little patience in our culture with such whistle blowing.

More Than Ethics

Be that as it may, St. Paul tells us that an immoral lifestyle is no laughing matter. Those who choose to live that way without repentance risk depriving themselves of a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. Well, then, what’s the answer? Is Christian morality just another set of rules designed to take joy out of life?

Happily not! St. Paul does not merely propose a higher standard of ethics, a joyless Stoicism. What he’s describing in Ephesians is a way of life that overtakes us once we’ve opened our hearts to Christ and allowed the Spirit to change us inwardly. In place of bitterness and anger, we are filled with compassion, especially for the poor and the vulnerable. In place of immorality and suggestive speech, we are filled with thanksgiving. In place of darkness, there emerges from our hearts the light and love of Christ. So, with due apologies to Groucho, Christ offers us in the Church a joy that is greater and more profound than anything the world offers, a joy deeply rooted in the truth of God’s love and the truth of our humanity – a joy that should be apparent in all we say and do.

Deliver Us from Gloomy Saints!

Exasperated with a fellow religious whose piety made her dour, St. Theresa of Avila wrote: “It is bad enough to be stupid by nature without trying to be stupid by grace! God deliver us from gloomy saints!” Christianity does not bid us to bottle up anger or suppress clever thoughts. It does not denigrate human sexuality but manifests its profoundest meaning and its enduring joy.

Let us pray each day that the light and joy and love of Christ will overtake whatever darkness is found in the recesses of our hearts. In this way, we will experience the joy of the Gospel and live as children of light! May God bless us and keep us always in his love!