

De Sales

SPIRITUALITY CENTER

"Just kidding...or is it?"



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Mary D. Ford

"A sense of humor keen enough to show a man his own absurdities, as well as those of other people will keep him from the commission of all sins, or nearly all." - Samuel Butler

"Humor is an affirmation of dignity, a declaration of man's superiority to all that befalls him." - Romain Gary

"He is not laughed at who laughs at himself first." - Thomas Fuller

"The most wasted day is that in which we have not laughed." - Chamfort

Humor in general and laughter in particular are not only healthy and fun but can actually promote healing. Perhaps that's why the most popular section in Reader's Digest continues to be, "Laughter: The Best Medicine."

St. Francis de Sales in the 17th century was one of the first spiritual writers to recognize the great value of humor. He saw it from a special vantage point. He reasoned that in order to become the best people that we can be we would have to get to know ourselves very well. In order to know ourselves very well we would have to study and accept

not only our good points but especially those aspects of our nature which are defective—our failings, our faults, our shortcomings.

When we recognize our defects, our imperfections, we realize that we have only two options—we can cry about them or we can laugh at them. Crying about them is fine, but we need to go beyond that. We need to get to the point that we actually love the fact that we make mistakes and do foolish and stupid things because then we can accept the fact that we are not in control of all that happens in our lives. We need to accept the fact that God is in control and we then can move to discover his will and surrender to it.

St. Francis de Sales would have us develop the "Holy Virtue of Eutrepelia." This is a name he borrowed from the Greek. It simply means laughing at ourselves. But it is practiced in a special way—it is done by telling stories about ourselves to our friends and family members.

We all do dumb things. Some days we do quite a few. If we get overly upset about these mistakes it can lead to anxiety and insecurity. If, however we put it all into perspective, we realize that we are not the perfect people we would always prefer to be and

that we have to depend on God to get us through.

In telling these stories we also allow others to see how human we are. We are not the totally "in control" people we sometimes appear to be. We do not see ourselves as better than others and we don't want to lord it over others. This also encourages others to share the funny, and sometimes stupid, things they have said and done. We can all laugh at our weaknesses and appreciate the same in others. It can be a powerful way of being free, of "letting go".

However, the practice of this "charitable kidding" can quickly become something far less noble when we aren't feeling so good about ourselves. In times like these we are tempted to point out others' faults in a sarcastic or vicious manner simply to make ourselves look better. When this becomes the motive we have lost the value and simple joy of Eutrepelia. Such laughter or humor is no longer medicinal; rather, it becomes something derisive and poisonous.

The ability to kid with ourselves and one another is like atomic energy: it can be an instrument of healing; it can also be a source of great pain. May God help us to use this power wisely.