

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



Pope Francis meets with comedians at the Apostolic Palace on June 14 in Vatican City. (Vatican Media/Getty Image via Vatican pool)

Joanne M. Pierce

[View Author Profile](#)

**THE
CONVER
SATION**

The Conversation

[View Author Profile](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

July 6, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

When Pope Francis addressed a group of top international [comedians](#) on June 14, he called them “artists” and stressed the value of their talents.

To many Catholics, this meeting came as a surprise. Traditionally, the themes of detachment, sacrifice, humility and repentance appear far more frequently in religious writing and preaching than the spiritual benefits of a good laugh.

But as a [specialist in medieval Christian history](#), I am aware that, since antiquity, many theologians, preachers, monastics and other Christians [have embraced the role of humor](#) as a valuable part of Christian spirituality. Some have even become popularly [known as the patron saints of comedians or laughter](#).

Comedy is natural

Many Catholic saints have considered laughter to be an integral part of nature itself. For example, the 12th-century German nun St. Hildegard of Bingen, a mystic poet and musician, [wrote in a poem on the power of God](#):

I am the rain coming from the dew
That causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.

In the 13th century, St. Francis of Assisi [called himself the "Jongleur de Dieu" — troubador or jester of God](#) — because of his ministry. He probably used a French reference because his mother came from France and spoke French at home. Francis and his followers wandered from town to town, singing God's praises and preaching joyfully in the streets. People laughed when he [preached to birds in trees](#), and he once had to politely ask a large flock to stop chirping first.

The 16th-century nun and mystic St. Teresa of Avila wrote in a poem, [alluding to the voice of Jesus Christ as love](#):

Love once said to me,

'I know a song, would you like to hear it?'

And laughter came from every brick in the street

And from every pore in the sky.

Humor and play are an important part of human nature. They provide opportunities for relaxation and relief and offer a way to cope with the challenges of human life.

In the 13th century, Dominican scholastic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas composed a lengthy summary of theology that became one of the most important resources in the Catholic tradition: the [Summa Theologica](#). In it, he argued that humor and other kinds of joyful recreation [offer the mind and soul the same kind of rest](#) that the body needs.

Aquinas cautioned, however, that these kinds of words or activities must not become hurtful or indecent.

Comedy can heal

The shared experience of laughing can break down barriers across cultures and bring people together.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits in the 16th century, is said [to have danced a jig](#) to [raise the spirits of a despondent man](#) on retreat; he also [praised a Jesuit novice](#) for his healthy laughter.



St. Ignatius is distinguished by his heart-shaped face and the Latin motto of the Society for Jesus, "Ad maiorem dei gloriam," or "for the greater glory of God." (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In the same century, St. Philip Neri, who has been [called the patron saint of humor and joy](#), was reputed to be a mystic and visionary. To put others at ease, [he engaged in pranks and jokes](#), once attending a gathering with [half of his beard shaved off](#).

Some famous Catholic saints even faced death with a smile, such as the second-century deacon St. Lawrence, one of [the patron saints of comedians](#). The legend goes that as he was executed by being roasted alive on a gridiron over a hot fire, he joked with his executioners, saying, "Turn me over ... I'm done on this side!" This legend has carried over [into the official story of his life](#).

The Carmelite nun St. Therese of Lisieux also lived a life marked by humor in the 19th century. Even as she lay dying from tuberculosis at the age of 24, she is said to have [joked with the other nuns and her doctor](#). Supposedly, when a priest was called to give her the last rites, he refused because she looked too healthy. She replied that she would try to look sicker the next time he was called.

Popes and humor

Francis is far from the only pope to stress the value of humor in Catholic and Christian life. Pope St. John XXIII, who in 1961 [summoned the Second Vatican Council](#), calling all Catholic bishops worldwide to a [series of formal meetings at the Vatican](#) to update Catholicism, was known for his humor. Famously, when asked once how many people worked at the Vatican, he replied, "About half of them."

The next pope, St. Paul VI — elected in 1963 — was an accomplished administrator [known for his wit](#). One of his papal documents was on the importance of "Christian joy." Now on the path to sainthood as "blessed," John Paul I, who reigned for only a month in 1978, was known as "[the smiling pope](#)" because of his cheerfulness.

Advertisement

Pope St. John Paul II, the [first non-Italian elected pope in almost 500 years](#), was only 58 years old when elected in 1978, and he was [well-known for his sense of humor](#).

The German cardinal who succeeded him in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI, also valued the role of humor in a balanced Christian life: "[Humor is in fact essential in the mirth of creation](#)."

And before this 2024 audience with comedians, Francis discussed the topic of humor more fully in his 2018 apostolic exhortation, [Gaudete et Exsultate](#) ("Rejoice and be glad"). In this important document, addressed to the whole Catholic Church, the pope stated that holiness is within the reach of every believer and is achieved

through a joyful life. Humor has a [section](#) of its own within the exhortation.

In the audience with comedians on June 14, Francis, who took the name in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, the troubadour of God, has very publicly affirmed that for Catholics, humor is an important part of a faithful life.

The meeting even concluded with one of the pope's favorite prayers, for good humor, attributed to St. Thomas More, the chancellor of England under King Henry VIII — fitting, given More's legendary sense of humor. Executed for treason in 1535, More is said to have asked the constable of the Tower of London to help him up the steps of the scaffold, with one of his last jokes: "[For my coming down, I can shift for myself.](#)"

The prayer asks God for, among other things, "[a good sense of humor ... to share with others.](#)"

[Joanne M. Pierce is professor emerita of religious studies at College of the Holy Cross. The views expressed in this commentary do not necessarily reflect those of Religion News Service.]