He Laughed His Way to Heaven

by PHILIP C. FENTON, S.J.

On May 26 we celebrate the feast of St. Philip Neri who very definitely had a sense of humor

I T IS the nature of the human mind to search into the essence of things and then put its searchings into a formula. Philosophers for centuries have been trying to fit the subject of humor into such a formula. Skeptics say humor is entirely subjective; agnostics say humor cannot be explained; Freemasons say humor is simplicity itself. Kant put the essence of humor in the emotion-burn of sudden reduction to nothing of an intense expectation. Plato was wary of humor, while Aristotle accepted it as a virtue.

Just what is humor, then? Can it be defined? A man has been asked by someone whether he “sees the point” of a joke, or not. If he did, then he has a sense of humor. If he lacked comprehension, and didn’t, well . . .

Neri was wary of a point, too. “Nothing in this world is to be taken seriously, nothing except the salvation of a soul.” The agnostic, the skeptic, and the atheist nec-

essarily have to take themselves seriously. They set themselves up as God; have no de-

pendence on the Creator. They lack a spiritual com-

prehension, and didn’t, well . . .

The agnostic put his unconscious experiences into a more regular life. But this was to

clude the diseased of the Roman alleys and gutters. He visited the hospitals and became a free-lancer in the Lord’s vineyard. Not always joking and laughing with them to build a greater process, and Philip went about his

night during a meal carrying on his shoulders a monkey holding a gun and wearing a biretta, with a visiting Cardinal present! One of Neri’s followers asked permission to wear a hair-

shirt. “Sure,” was Neri’s reply, “only inside out, and over your cassock.”—a type of morti-

fication the subject hadn’t bargained for. Per-

son never lost their respect for this saintly jest-

er, though the jest was an imaginerable which was to destroy their esteem. No harm was ever done by his fantasticity: it only made them ven-

erate him all the more. He knew just how far to go.

His teasing went beyond to reach dignitaries. Charles Borromeo, one of the high-ranking Cardinals, often told Neri that he would grant anything he ever requested, but Neri never requested anything. Every time the Cardinal met Philip in a gathering, he would remind him of his promise, but Philip always refused. One time Neri thought he would have some fun. Strolling up to the Car-


dinal, he reminded him of his promise.

“The Lord Jesus said, ‘If you know me, you will not grant it,’” Philip asked.

“No, he won’t,” the Cardinal asked.

“Why not?” Philip replied.

“Oh, no, you won’t,” Philip insisted.

This went on for a few minutes until finally the Cardinal said, “Tell me what it is, and I will do for you.”

Then came the joke. “Well, I would like your Most Illustrious Lordship to give me the secret of making my beard black.”

Maynard, in his book on Philip, defined humor as “something whose essence is to appeal to the sensibility of the mind which alone is the thing distinguishing between things. It is a form of judgment. Chesterton perceived in St. Thomas Aquinas that instantaneous presence of mind which alone deserves the name of wit. And that sort of wit—as distinguished from mere talent for making small retorts—cannot be valued enough. All the same, humor is something still higher. It is not a mere sense of proportion, for it is a species of common sense.” Philip’s main object in being the “clown” and playing practical jokes, though at times he must have naturally taken them to an extreme, was to draw men to God with jests and humor. Philip once remarked, “A cheerful and glad spirit at-

tains to perfection much more readily than a melancholy spirit.”

Refused to Become Cardinal

As a result of his constant contact with the Vatican, he repeatedly had to refuse the Car-


dinalate. On his first visit to the newly elected Gregory XIV, as the Holy Father embraced Philip, he snatched the red biretta which he had worn as Cardinal, put it on Philip and said, “Now We create you Cardinal.” Philip laughed it off as a big joke, but the red biretta was sent the next morning to his apartment, and Neri had to do some quick thinking. He did so, quietly, as always, and escaped the honor.

When Neri visited the Vatican, as he so often did, was something of a trial for Neri. He always had to fight down the impulse to go up and stroke the beard of one of the Swiss Guards standing stiffly at attention. The impulse was too great. Some say he actually did this as he and ten (Concluded on page 43)
KITTENS, ANYONE?

We put them in baskets, in floppy straw hats;
We deck them with bows and we pose them on mats
And give them as presents to neighbors and friends—
Where we frequently find friendship suddenly ends.

We give them as prizes, but somehow or other
We never keep up with their kittenish mother.

But aren't they wide-eyed? Such bundles of fun!
Kittens? Wee kittens? . . . Hey, CATS, anyone?

—Ethel Jacobson

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[CONCLUDED FROM PAGE 23]

Cardinals strolled the Vatican corridors one day.

His activities in and about the environs of the city were numerous. When Pope Julius II allowed the Italian Carnival to resume in 1535, Neri foresaw the many temptations it would present for his youths, and so planned a counter-attraction. He organized spectacular picnics for the teen-agers of Rome, and created a healthy atmosphere with music, These were the five who were healthiest, says: "He who dwells in the City Celestial."

There is only one place in Sacred Scripture where God is said to laugh. The Psalmist, in relating the rules and people of the world conspire against the Lord and His anointed, says: "He who dwells in Heaven is laughing at their threats; the Lord makes light of them." (Ps. 2:4). But God must have greeted Philip Neri at the Gates of Heaven with a hearty chuckle, for he truly was the saint who "laughed his way to Heaven."