

In Memoriam: Pope Francis – “In the Image of a God Who Smiles”

Peter Chave¹

This is the title of chapter 23 of *Hope: The Autobiography* by Pope Francis. The book was published in time for the Jubilee Year. It contains a lot of information about the Bergoglio family and their migration from Piedmont to Argentina. We see where Francis’s great concern for migrants and refugees came from. Another major theme has been care for the environment in our embattled home the Earth – a cause now placed firmly on the agenda of the Church.

But, what a joy that humor rates its own chapter in the book: which begins with a quotation from Romain Gary: “Hope is an amusing child too. She knows that humour and a smile are the leaven of existence and a means of facing difficulties and even major worries with real fortitude.”

A prayer of Thomas More was prayed by Pope Francis every day for forty years: “Grant me, O Lord, a sense of good humour. Allow me the grace to be able to take a joke, to discover in life a bit of joy and to share it with others.” Humor brings wisdom which is found in many cultures. Francis quotes the Dinka people of South Sudan whom he visited in 2023. They do not fear or dislike foreigners but laugh at their “red” faces with amazement and kindly glee.

Francis famously invited over a hundred comedians to a meeting in the Vatican. This should have surprised no one, since he had adopted the name of (Saint) Francis – “God’s jester.” Irony shows us the world aslant and can help us see it clearly. Learning to laugh at ourselves brings a healthy humility.

The biblical story of Isaac, whose name means “he laughs,” sets us on the right track. The clergy are often fond of a joke. Francis had fond boyhood memories of the Fernandel

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film, "The Little World of Don Camillo." Pope Francis recalled a story about Pope John Paul II. He was a skier, a mountaineer and a swimmer but a colleague suggested that now he had been made a cardinal such activities were not appropriate. John Paul's riposte was "Do you not know that almost 50% of the cardinals in Poland engage in these activities?" (There were two cardinals in Poland at the time).

It is tempting to quote all the jokes in the chapter but the story of Pope Francis and the limousine should be left until you read it in the book.

There are many reasons for us to be grateful to Pope Francis. His encouragement of humor is not the least of them.

References

Pope Francis. (2025). *Hope: The Autobiography*. New York: Random House.