

Oh Theophilus! Oh G. G.!

Robert W. Bertram

[Commencement Address, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso,
Indiana, June 9, 1968]

When Robert Kennedy was defeated in the Oregon primaries the other day, he was asked, How does it feel to be the first Kennedy ever to lose an election? He replied, Apart from the distinction, I could just as well do without it. The Kennedy wit—his as well as his older brother's—was always at its best when the going was rough, in face of criticism and apparent defeat. I say “apparent” defeat because the only man who can still laugh at a time like that is one who knows defeat is not ultimate. Merely penultimate. He is privy to some surpassing certitude that, beyond the momentary reverses, the final outcome is sure to be victory—if not here and now, sooner or later. Not that he isn't serious. True, he isn't overly serious about himself. Still, the opposite of humor is not seriousness. The opposite is fear. High humor may be deadly serious. But fearful? No. Confident? Always. This is a good afternoon to talk about that, on this national day of mourning which, by a kind of high and holy humor, happens also to be The Festival of the Holy Trinity. Humor and the holy. It is a subject worthy of Robert Francis Kennedy, and worthy of you, good graduates.

A good place to talk about humor and the holy is Valparaiso University. It was here, if I may speak for myself, that fifteen short years taught me the lesson which all of church history corroborates: the church laughs best when she trusts best. Those have been the church's great ages of faith. They were also the ages when the church was being most grievously tested, when to

all earthly appearances it looked like she was down to her last chip: the fall of Rome, the uncertain outreach of the missionaries into the pagan north, the Reformation. Luther, I suppose, is Exhibit A—or more likely, Exhibit B. The humor of our Lord and the apostles was the best of all. Their New Testament word for it was “hilarity,” *hilaritas*. Jonathan Edwards used to get awfully discouraged by what he saw of the New England Christian. Yet even he could say—and he was a Calvinist, at that— “Any man who can laugh like that must be awfully sure of his salvation.”

Witness Valpo. Here you and I have known some of the church’s most colorful sinners. And they have known they were that, often with the most frightening candor. But they have known something else, too: that the divine judgment upon them is not the last word but the word of forgiveness, of Easter, of final triumph, is! Oh, how we have laughed in this place, because of that. I needn’t mention names. That would take too long. And you would have new names of your own to add. We can accomplish the same thing by citing instead some of those fictional characters for whom Valpo has become famous. (Voice from the rear: the word is notorious.) In a moment I’m going to recall for you two of these pseudonyms in particular. One is a fellow whose monthly letters to the editor used to appear in The Cresset, postmarked “Xanadu, Nebraska,” and signed simply “G. G.” The second one is still writing for another Valparaiso publication called Campus Commentary; his name, which now has become legendary among the reverend clergy of the Missouri Synod, is “Theophilus.”

There have been others. Do you remember “Howard Fang,” that mythical hero created by one of the local fraternities? They so succeeded in making Fang credible that he almost walked off one year with a student council election. Or “Simon Schneeweis”? His theological writings were so shockingly radical that Valpo finally was forced to reveal that there really had been someone

by that name, at the time of the Reformation, and that all his theology (then and now) came from nowhere else but The Lutheran Confessions. Then of course there is always that character who writes the back cover of The Cresset, "The Pilgrim." But you know who he is. If you don't, you shouldn't be graduating.

I.

Who was G. G.? Really he was all of us-at our middle-age worst, our forgiven worst—an uneasy fusion of tears and laughter, a sort of Missouri Synod Willy Loman. If you could believe his letters, he was Xanadu, Nebraska's farm implement dealer, the secretary of the International Lutheran Implement Dealer's Association of the U.S. and Canada, and the editor of that association's journal, The Spreader. His pastor's name was "Zeitgeist."

I recall how in one of his letters G. G. explained how he had come into greatness in the church. The letter began as always, "Dear Editor."

Every now and then, somebody writes in and asks me how I ever got to be such a great Christian. I guess they read these letters of mine and get to wondering how a farm implement dealer out in Nebraska ever got to be such a big wheel in the church.

Well, this is going to sound funny, I know, but what really got me started was joining the Men's club here, in the congregation. Before I joined the Men's Club, I thought that being a Christian was just a matter of believing, which anybody can do if he tries hard enough. But merely believing doesn't make a man an outstanding Christian...You've got to get into things, ... if you want to get places in the church.

My real break came when I was appointed chairman of the Men's Club committee to organize a trip to St. Louis to see the Cardinals play. The thing went over so well that from then on ... I was a marked man. The very next year, I was elected an usher in the congregation and within five years I was an elder.

The letter goes on and on with more of the same kind of misplaced modesty, and then closes with a P.S.

Like I expected, I got licked for congregational chairman last month. That's the other side of being a natural born leader. People will follow you when they've got a problem that they can't solve, but when they've got some honors to pass around they give them to the Good Joes. I consider it a kind of tribute to my leadership ability that I was not elected. [Signed] G. G. (Jan., "55, 38-39)

Which only goes to show, I guess, that the Lord always has the last laugh.

One of the ways the Lord had for keeping G. G. in his place was to saddle him with a son named Homer. G. G. sent Homer to college, though not to Valpo. G. G. explains why.

I didn't send my own kids to Valpo because I figured it would do them good to get in with the better class of people and maybe get some of the Dutchiness rubbed off of them. But I think it's a good thing to have a place where the ordinary Lutheran kid can go and not feel out of place . . .

As far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't have objected if Homer ... had gotten a little religion on the side when [he was] going to college, but I do think you can overdo it. This new chapel of yours [at Valpo] isn't going to help you any. ...

The way I see it, the church needs the kind of well-rounded young folks that go to the regular colleges and universities, and then it also needs the kind that goes to Valpo. (Sept., '59, 23)

Even though Homer did go to one of the "regular colleges," not to Valpo, he did have his problems.

Oh by the way, [G. G. writes in one of his letters] Homer finally got into a regular game last week. The coach sent him in for two minutes but it seems that the quarterback did such a poor job of explaining the play that Homer got mixed up and ended up tackling one of his own team-mates, so the coach took him out and, of course, put all the blame on Homer. Homer thinks that the quarterback did it deliberately because he has always had a grudge against Homer because Homer drives a Buick and the quarterback only has a Pontiac. I knew that you ran into trouble like this in the business world but I didn't think you would find it among college athletes. (Nov., '53, 34)

But the worst thing that befalls Homer at college, at least the worst thing from the standpoint of G. G., is that Homer is beginning to pick up some ideas which strike his father as being dangerously left-wing. "It seems to me," says G. G., "that we taxpayers ought to have some protection for our kids. I didn't send Homer to college to have him learn to disagree with everything that I think." But G. G. consoles himself. "There's one good thing about Homer, of course. No matter how many ideas he picks up, he never remembers them long. He's a man of action, like I am, and in the long run he'll go along with whatever ideas work out in practice and forget the rest." (Apr., '53, 45)

However, as it turns out, G. G. had consoled himself too soon. Homer does remember the ideas he is learning, after all. And G. G. discovers to his own great dismay that he now has, of all

things, an intellectual in the family, an "egghead." It all came out in the open when Homer was home for summer vacation. He "wouldn't go out at night," says G. G., he "read till all hours of the morning, and started talking like he had stripped his gears.

Imagine. Here I was sitting out on the porch one night smoking a cigar and working on a bottle of Bud when all of a sudden, out of the blue, Homer says, "Dad, just what are you trying to get out of life?" Holy smokes! I told him that by the time he gets to my age he will realize that it isn't a question of getting something out of life; it's just a matter of getting through life. So then he says, "No, I mean why do you think you were placed on earth?" and I didn't try to answer that question because it happens that I was born when my parents were in their early forties and I have always suspected that I was sort of lucky to have been born at all. You know what I mean.

Well, that's the way it went all summer. Silly questions and crazy remarks. There for a couple of weeks he was reading some screwball Dane named Gerkengard or something like that and I thought he was really going to jump the track.

To cut a long story short, Homer finally broke down one night and came out with the whole story. He didn't want to go back to the U. He wanted to go to the Seminary. . . Well, you can imagine that at that point I really started to sweat ... So we had a heart-to-heart talk. I told Homer . . . that I could sympathize with his interest in religion . . . , but that he should remember the Bible's advise to practice moderation in all things, including religion . . . What I am hoping is that he will get back to the U. and maybe take up with his old friends at the frat house and get his feet back on the ground again . . . [Someday] he will be able to get a good laugh out

of looking back on these days and on this crazy idea of going into the ministry. (Oct., '55, 46-47)

Well, as things turn out, the Lord spares G. G. from having a minister for a son. Still, what he gets instead is almost as funny: a history prof. Homer goes on to graduate work in history, and you can hear the divine chuckle behind G. G.'s back. Homer has trouble completing his Ph.D., and G. G. has to chip in to help the project along. Leaving no stone unturned, G. G. appeals to the editor at Valpo. "By the way, Homer is looking for a job—nothing permanent but something to do while he is writing his dissertation (sp?) which he hopes to have finished by next summer. Do you happen to know whether there are still any openings on the faculty at Valpo? He's tried several other schools but they all tell him to come back after he gets the Ph.D. Regards, G. G." (Sept., '59, 23)

These "Letters from Xanadu, Nebraska," ran on for about a decade to the delight of almost everyone—almost everyone—until all of a sudden they stopped. G. G. had been questioning the advisability of a Lutheran law school. He feared that when you mix law and religion, lawyers get funny ideas and might just want to go into politics and reform the world.

When you think of the number of lawyers who go into politics, [he said] I really wonder whether we should encourage Christian young people to take up law. I think we owe a duty to our young folks to steer them away from certain kinds of work where they might lose their faith, like science and politics and law, and try to steer them into good, wholesome, constructive work like the ministry or farming or business where honesty actually is the best policy and a man is not always being tempted to sin. Regards, G. G. (May, '61, 19)

That was the last of that. Some conscientious souls among The

Cresset's readership were not convinced there was room any longer for G. G., this incongruous combination of sinner and saint, humor and the holy. So the letters stopped. The editors explained why. As for the use of humor, they said, "to point up the twisted and distorted thinking to which even Christians are prone, we have reluctantly reached the conclusion that the spirit of the times, both in the Church and in secular society, is such that the use of humor for such purposes is more likely to offend than to edify." (June, '61, 20) You, good graduates, on whom now rides that "spirit of the times," could still prove the editors wrong.

II.

Theophilus, by contrast, is still going strong. May his tribe increase. There is this slim yellow sheet—literally yellow—which sporadically is sent out from Valpo to the Missouri Synod clergy. It is called, harmlessly enough, Campus Commentary. The author, as no one has ever really doubted, is somebody called O. P. Kretzmann. Now and then he reports on the correspondence and conversation he has with a certain Theophilus, pastor of Saint Beelzebub Lutheran Church. It used to be Saint John's by-the-Gas Station. Two of the members of that congregation are Theophilus' special thorns in the flesh, Deacon Sauerbraten and Grandma Himmelhoch. Pastor Theophilus is not a world-beater, and there are a lot of things in the world, but especially in the church, he has trouble figuring out—worst of all, at synodical conventions. He drives an old vintage Chevrolet. His topcoat, by my reckoning, is now sixteen years old, and his raincoat, which is seventeen years old, is bulging at the pockets with exciting new theological paperbacks. He actually reads them. So, as you can see, Theophilus will never become a college president or a seminary professor or, least of all, a district president. He is, as we say, just a pastor. His wife, Mrs. Theophilus, is just

a saint, though for that very reason she seems to be more worldly-wise than her often bewildered husband.

One morning at a synodical convention, Campus Commentary writes, "I met ["Theophilus in the hotel coffee-shop] examining a menu with a furrowed brow. When I asked him if he was in trouble he said sadly: 'My congregation gave me two bucks a day for food. Ham and eggs here cost \$1.75. I am either going to starve or I am going to lose money on this deal.' I tried to comfort him with the story of [our Lord's feeding of] the five thousand but he did not think this was relevant." (XII-1, 2a) The next morning things had gotten worse. Campus Commentary has to take Theophilus to breakfast. He had "sent Mrs. Theophilus some flowers for Father's Day congratulating her on her choice of husband. Now he is broke." (July, '65, 36) It was at the New York convention, and Theophilus, far from his home in the Plains States, was complaining about how cold and unfriendly the big-city dwellers were. He says, "When I was on the street I always wore my [convention] badge and I had a cheery greeting for everyone I met, but I never got more than a surprised grunt in return. Oh, there was one exception. One night I was walking on 53rd Street in front of the tea hotel and two nicely dressed young ladies greeted me. They even started up a conversation but we didn't seem to be getting through to each other, and I lost interest when I found out neither one of them came from North Dakota." (Sept., '67, 6a)

Mrs. Theophilus, for reasons I can well imagine, had hoped to accompany her husband to that convention. (I would say—wouldn't you?—that he was quite safe.) However, the family budget wouldn't bear her going along. As Commentary explains, the Theophilus' son "John needed a new bike to cover his newspaper route and Elsie, now a self-conscious high-school freshman, had to have her teeth straightened. Mrs. Theophilus had really been looking forward to New York. She wanted to do some shopping on

Sixth Avenue and on 14th Street where she had heard things were cheap. Above all, she wanted a new bathing suit for their vacation in Wisconsin. Her old one, she said, had a hole in the knee." (Sept., '67, 7b)

I suspect it was the same Mrs. Theophilus whom Commentary had observed at an earlier convention, in Cleveland. She was sitting in the balcony, and she "continued to knit no matter what was happening on the floor of the convention. Accusations and denials flew hot and heavy across the floor, but her needle never wavered. About the fifth day some of us began to consider her a good omen, a symbol of the fundamental strength and quietness of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. As long as she continued knitting, there seemed to be no danger. . . I must confess that when I entered the auditorium each morning I looked in her direction to see if she was still knitting. If she was, I knew instinctively that all would be well, and that all bad resolutions would be voted down. Perhaps I should add that [at one point in the debate, when one of the seminary professors had to stand up and plead for forgiveness,] she stopped knitting." (July, '62, 1c)

"Synod forgave him 656 to 14." (July, '62, 2c) Why, good graduates, did the lady stop knitting? Perhaps to laugh? That would be my guess. But did she laugh at the 14? Or did she laugh for the professor and for the 656? That, good graduates, is the test of the holiness of your humor. If I know Mrs. Theophilus, she laughed for the professor and for his forgiveness.

If that was Mrs. Theophilus (the lady knitting) then she must be the same one about whom the mail brought this simple death notice to Campus Commentary the other day: "She was laid to rest on Sunday afternoon. She is survived by the Rev. [So-and-So] and five children." Commentary adds: "There must be a very special place in heaven for her—. . . with no telephones, no worn

[parsonage] carpets, and no last year's hats. When she arrived ... a very kindly angel asked her what she would like to do most. She said, 'I would like to sit still for about two hours, but no more than that. There is something my husband asked me to do.' But soon she was not tired anymore, and now a very... understanding God lets her walk softly in the high halls of heaven with only the best seraphim singing for her—after so many years of church choirs—and only the most golden trumpets sounding from the gates." (Oct., '64, lc-2a) Is that, good graduates, a matter for tears or for laughter? The answer is Yes.

Of course, there is also the derisive laughter, the divine ho-ho at the strutting and preening of pompous, self-serious little men. Pastor Theophilus writes about the atheists in his town. They have arranged with the local telephone company for an atheist dial-a- prayer: You dial the number and nobody answers. But the kind of pretentiousness which rates Theophilus' loudest guffaws—and I suspect, God's—is the kind he encounters in the church, particularly among those churchmen who are so piously given to criticize the church. One day Theophilus and Commentary came to the conclusion that "the right to criticize, especially within the Church, must be earned. We then solemnly resolved [said Commentary] to pay no more attention to the gripes and yelps of those [clergymen] whose own communicant membership has steadily gone down (check The Statistical Yearbook), whose synodical contributions are below average, who have no aggressive missionary program, and who have never demonstrated, visibly and tangibly, that they really love their Church...The brother who says, 'I love all synodical officials and editors, therefore I will now proceed to kick them in the teeth,'... must from now on point to at least one soul who is now in heaven because of his labors. Theophilus added that we should also try to discover how such a brother treats his wife, but we finally

decided that this would be difficult to publish in The Statistical Yearbook or even in The Lutheran Witness (June, '63, 5c)

On the same theme of ecclesiastical piosity, Theophilus is reminded of those long, tedious prayers which undertake presumably to bring God up to date on what's been going on down here. "Well do I remember the good brother [he says] who was asked to conduct the opening devotion at one of our summer camps. He prayed and prayed. He told the Lord everything that had happened in the Missouri Synod since the last synodical convention; he repeated the headlines of the past month. When he was all through, the conference patriarch, grown gray and wise through forty years in the ministry, said to him gently: "Don't you think. Brother X, that the Lord reads The Lutheran Witness?" (Oct., '56, 3c)

Still, the last and the holiest laugh is not the laugh of derision but the laugh of exultation, the laughing of the angels over one sinner who repents, the sheer glee of love which exalts the meek and lowly sinners like Theophilus and G.G. to the rank of kings and princes. One day Theophilus and Commentary spent an afternoon at one of the church's schools for deaf-mute children. "It was an unforgettable experience. There was first of all the almost incredible patience of the teachers. I watched in silent wonder as one of the teachers was trying to get a six year old boy to say the letter "B" (not "bee" but just "b"). Over and over again—both the teacher and the boy, a picture of hard stubborn courage—until he finally made a sound which resembled "b". At that moment both the teacher and the boy laughed with great happiness, as the angels must laugh when something great and good is happening." (July, '62, 5a)

And many other things too humorous to mention. But by now the point should be clear. As Campus Commentary once observed,

“Perhaps we have forgotten that our ability to laugh theologically depends on the number of our certitudes...The world of the skeptic is an utterly humorless world...A man who lives with God can join in the divine activity described in Psalm 2:4.” (XIII-1, 4b) And what that psalm has God doing, you’ll recall, is laughing. Humor and the holy. Any fool can laugh. But it takes a very special fool, a fool for Christ, to laugh the laughter of God. I hope—I hope to God, for his mercy’s sake—that that sort of humor will never depart from this place. Nor from you.

Robert W. Bertram
Commencement Address
Valparaiso University
June 9, 1968

[OhTheophilusOhGG \(PDF\)](#)