

Series: Contemplative Mischief - Episode 3 – Holy Absurdities

The Holy Fool: A Contemplative Christian Tradition

“The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.”

—1 Corinthians 1:25

There is a laughter in the heart of God that we rarely hear—and when we do, it often sounds like nonsense.

The Christian tradition is rooted in paradox: a King born in a stable, a Messiah who washes feet, a cross that becomes a throne. Jesus spoke in riddles, parables, and reversals—calling the last blessed, the meek mighty, and the tiny seed a doorway to the Kingdom. His words could unsettle the wise and comfort the poor, all in a single breath.

This upside-down wisdom didn't end with him. The early Desert Fathers and Mothers, those spiritual pioneers of silence, often taught through holy absurdities: pouring water into baskets, hiding from admirers in caves, or sitting silently for years to learn humility. One monk kept a stone in his mouth to learn when to be quiet. Another pretended to be mad so that no one would honour him. These were not performances of eccentricity but living koans—paradoxical gestures pointing toward deeper truth.

Saint Francis, too, knew the strange logic of the Kingdom. He called rejection, cold, and ridicule *perfect joy*. Saint

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Philip Neri shaved half his beard to keep himself from vanity. Saint Symeon the Holy Fool dragged a dead fish through the marketplace and played pranks in the liturgy—yet people followed him, because in his foolishness they sensed holiness.

Mystics and theologians have long known that the sacred sometimes arrives in disguise. Kierkegaard called faith a “leap” beyond reason. Simone Weil wrote that grace enters only where there is emptiness. G.K. Chesterton noted, “Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.” What good advice that would be for most of us in church and society! And Thomas Merton—so serious in his longing for God—also laughed at his own seriousness.

This is not whimsy for its own sake. Holy foolishness has teeth. It challenges pride, disarms the intellect, and invites the soul to kneel—not before an idea, but before a wordless mystery.

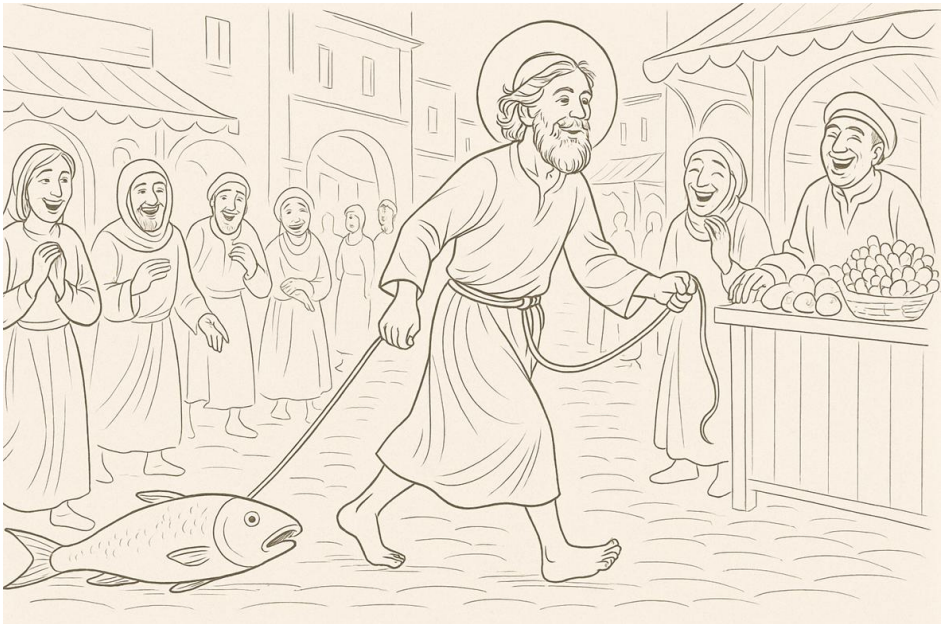
What follows, then, is not satire. It is a reverent wink. Absurdity, here, becomes a doorway. And sometimes, the door opens in laughter.

References and Attributions

1. “The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom...” (1 Corinthians 1:25) — *New Testament*
2. Parables such as “The last shall be first,” “the mustard seed,” and “the hidden treasure” (e.g. Matthew 20:16, Mark 4:30–32, Matthew 13:44) — *New Testament*

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3. Stories of Agathon (stone in the mouth), Anthony, and others from the desert tradition — *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. *Benedicta Ward*
4. “Perfect Joy” account, in which Francis and Brother Leo praise rejection and suffering — *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*
5. Accounts of Philip Neri’s playful humility (e.g., half-shaved beard) — *John B. Dalgairns, Saint Philip Neri: A Sketch of His Character and Life*
6. Tales of the prankster mystic who healed in secret — *Leontios of Neapolis, The Life of Saint Symeon the Fool*
7. “The leap of faith” as a core paradox of true belief — *Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling*
8. “Grace fills empty spaces...” — *Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace*
9. “Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly” — *G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy*
10. “We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves...” — *Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation*



St Symeon the Holy Fool

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3. Holy Absurdities

absurdity is just the cloak—spirituality is the naked body.

*the sacred sometimes arrives in disguise, and forgets to take off
the clown shoes.*

*when meaning turns itself inside out, get ready for barefoot
wonder.*



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3:1

Two Franciscans walk into a fortune-teller's tent...
They pay with silence.
The crystal ball fogs with laughter.

3:2

Two Franciscans walk upon a board game on a park
bench...
They flip the board, bless the dice,
and declare both players victorious.

3:3

Two Franciscans walk into a philosophy debate...
They bring a loaf of bread and vanish.
The crowd votes unanimously in their favour.

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3:4

Two Franciscans walk into a silent sermon of the Buddha.
Mahākāśyapa smiled.
The monks grinned at each other, "This-ness! This-ness!"

3:5

Two Franciscans walk into a hardware store that sells
ladders...
"No, we want a ladder for going down."
The shopkeeper looks at them strangely.
"Ascent is climbed in descent."

3:6

Two Franciscans walk into a tailor's shop...
They order nothing.
The tailor weeps with quiet joy.



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3:7

Two Franciscan professors walk into a class of fresh novices...
Why did you think you needed teaching?
What you seek is already in you.

3:8

Two Franciscans walk into an old lighthouse at noon...
They light the lamp anyway.
A ship in the unseen distance changes course.

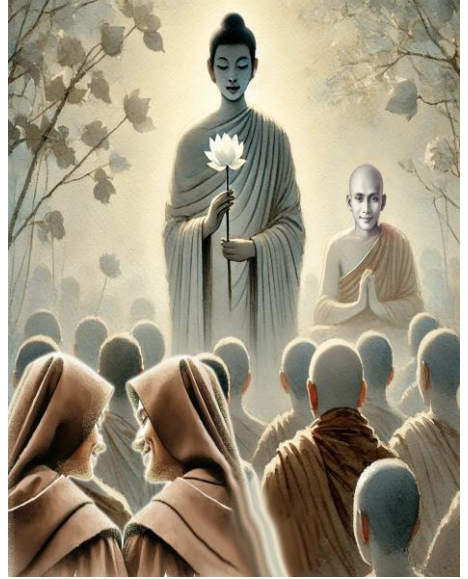
3:9

Two Franciscans walk along a country path, in good spirits.
Joy is not a result but a pathway.
So they danced until the truth caught up.

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3:8 lamp at noon...



3:4 this-ness!...



3:17 be the echo...

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3:10

Two Franciscans walk into a self-improvement class...
The teacher says, "Live in the moment of now!"
The friars stand reverently and sing a hymn.
"The now is not a time, but a Person!"

3:11

Two Franciscans walk into a sacred meditation class,
muttering...
The teacher whispers, "Sshhh."
The loudest prayer is a breath.

3:12

Two Franciscans walk straight into a lovers' quarrel...
An upset young couple couldn't see eye to eye.
One monk said gently,
"We love in order to understand."

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3:13

Two Franciscans walk into a treasure vault...
They replace the gold with breadcrumbs.
The guards don't notice.

3:14

Two Franciscans walk into a café that serves only riddles...
They drink in silence.
The waiter bows.

3:15

Two wet Franciscans walk to a storm shelter...
They sit in silence outside the door,
drinking the graceful rain.



GOD
SHOWS
UP

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3:16

Two Franciscans walk into a stable...
They thank Brother Donkey for carrying them this far.
He asks if they'd carry him next time.

3:17

Two Franciscans walk onto a beautiful mountain slope...
A child calls into the valley, chasing echoes.
"Be the echo, child. The voice will find you!"

3:18

Two Franciscans walk with pilgrims on the Camino de
Santiago...
A small café. Pilgrims talk... the miles left to walk.
"Our goal is... underfoot."

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3:19

Two Franciscans walk into a storm shelter on a sunny day...
They leave their fears inside and emerge, looking up.
"Outside and inside – Amen to the sky!"