

# PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

## The Power of Festivity in Unfestive Times



Daniel McInerny

---

### YOU ARE VERY BRAVE TO

sit down to read a piece by a philosopher on the theme of festivity. We philosophers do not exactly have a reputation for spreading joy and the festive spirit. We can, in fact, be rather dull at parties, especially when we start quoting our favorite German philosophers. (I should say, when we get invited to parties.) A friend of Dr. Johnson, the 18th-century British poet and essayist, once told him that he had done his best to become a philosopher, but cheerfulness kept breaking through. Well, in this article I will do my best to play against type and remain cheerful as I share with you some thoughts about festivity and its surprising power to evangelize the culture.

First, let's be clear on what we mean by festivity. We think we know what festivity is, don't we? It's the Christmas party, the birthday party, the Friday happy hour, and the special family dinner when the kids are home. But we need to be careful. Genuine festivity may play a part in

### About the Author



**Dr. Daniel McInerny** received his B.A. degree in English from the University of Notre Dame before going on to complete his M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Among his other academic appointments, from 2003 to 2009 he was an associate director of the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture. He joined the philosophy department at Christendom in the fall of 2019. His scholarly work focuses on questions at the intersection of art and the moral life.

such activities, but then again, it may not. A special family dinner may, depending on the circumstances, be downright unfestive, and I don't just mean when Uncle Fred starts tippling. What I mean is, the appearance of people having a good time—smiles,

laughter, conversation, music, plenty of good food and drink—does not guarantee that genuine festivity is occurring. Genuine festivity springs from a source deeper and more mysterious than any of these appearances. It is a source that can give us far more than a warm and pleasant feeling. It has the power, in fact, “to restore all things in Christ.”

In order to uncover the secret of true festivity, I want to begin with a winter’s tale. Actually, with *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare’s late comedy, first performed in 1611.

The inciting incident of the play occurs when Leontes, King of Sicilia, accuses his pregnant queen, Hermione, of adultery. With no reasonable cause whatsoever, Leontes suspects that the child Hermione carries is the offspring of Hermione’s illicit affair with Leontes’ oldest and best friend, Polixenes, King of Bohemia. Leontes imprisons Hermione and there, shortly after giving birth to a daughter, Perdita (“the lost one”), Hermione dies heartbroken. Leontes then orders one of his retainers to take the infant Perdita into exile.

At Christendom, one of the philosophy electives I teach is Ethics & Imagination. In this course, we reflect upon how the imagery in creative works of literature shows us (rather than tells us) what it means to live an ethically good life. In the spirit of this course, I want to offer King Leontes’ irrationality at the beginning of *The Winter’s Tale* as an image of a political community in fear, confusion, and turmoil. In other words, take Leontes as an image of the way we live now: with so many of our schools and businesses

clamped shut; with so many fearing rampant spread of COVID-19; with our houses of worship battling to keep their doors open; with scandal and division in the Body of Christ itself. As in Leontes’ Sicilia, the goodness, truth, and beauty that Hermione represents today have been cruelly served, leaving us all in the position of Perdita, like little “lost ones” in exile.

But this isn’t the end of the story of King Leontes. In the final act of the play, Leontes is invited by the “grave and good” Paulina, his deceased queen’s devoted lady-in-waiting, to come to her home in order to see a newly made statue. Sixteen years have passed since Leontes’ irrational tirade against his wife, and in those sixteen years he has done much to atone for his sin, as Paulina acknowledges:

Sir, you have done enough, and  
have perform’d  
A saint-like sorrow. No fault  
could you make  
Which you have not redeem’d;  
indeed, paid down  
More penitence than done  
trespass. (5.1.1-4)

Leontes’ penitence opens the way for genuine festivity; his sixteen years of mortification clear away the weeds and brambles that have covered the mysterious wellspring of true joy. Indeed, the waters from that spring have begun to refresh the world once again. The lost Perdita has recently been found, in Polixenes’ Bohemia of all places, where she has fallen in love with and promised to marry Polixenes’ son, Florizel. Now returned to Sicilia, she is reunited with her father, while Leontes is reconciled



*The Winter's Tale*, Act II, Scene 3: Antigonus swears his loyalty to Leontes, in an attempt to save Leontes' young daughter's life.

with Polixenes.

However, the greatest part of the family's festive reconciliation is still to come. When the family arrives at Paulina's house to see the statue, they are taken by her into a "gallery," what is also referred to as her "chapel." There the statue awaits them, covered by a sheet. When Paulina removes the sheet, the onlookers behold a wonderfully lifelike image of Hermione, so wonderful that the statue even shows the wrinkles brought on by the intervening sixteen years. As Leontes gazes awestruck at the statue of his wife, Paulina declares that she has a further surprise. Before she reveals it, she warns them:

**It is required**

**You do awake your faith.**

(5.3.118-19)

Paulina then bids the statue of Hermione to come down from the pedestal, and—to the amazement of all—the statue obeys. Hermione descends from the pedestal alive and

well, and husband and wife, mother and daughter, two estranged friends and their children—two estranged kingdoms—are reunited with the deepest, most satisfying joy.

Shakespeare is cagey as to whether Hermione has indeed miraculously come back to life, or whether Paulina and Hermione have contrived to keep Hermione safe and hidden all these years. The evidence of the play pretty clearly points to the latter alternative, but even if Hermione is not miraculously resurrected, the power of the image remains the same. What Shakespeare is showing us in Hermione's "resurrection" is an image of perfect festivity.

Notice: it isn't the image of a party. No doubt, a feast to celebrate the various reunions will surely follow later that day, and, presumably, the celebration of Perdita and Florizel's wedding will soon follow as well. But these celebrations are not themselves the heart of festivity.



The *Winter's Tale*, Act V, Scene 3: Leontes and Paulina, Hermione as a statue.

Important as they are, they are only the physical form of the invisible spring that is the true festive spirit.

Take another look at the image Shakespeare offers us. Remember that the statue is kept by Paulina in her “chapel.” At the moment of revelation, Paulina instructs Leontes and the rest to awaken their faith. When the statue is uncovered, both Leontes and Perdita kneel before it as if in adoration, as if the statue were a monstrance. And after Hermione descends and Paulina directs the overwhelmed Leontes to take Hermione’s hand, Leontes does so exclaiming:

O, she’s warm!

If this be magic, let it be an art  
Lawful as eating. (5.3.136-38)

Leontes wants the “transubstantiation” contrived by Paulina to be as “lawful as eating,” just as in the New Law of the Gospel

we consume the crucified Christ come back to life.

What Shakespeare offers us at the climax of *The Winter’s Tale* is an image of the Eucharist. And what is the Eucharist but the greatest of feasts? And what power this feasting has! It has the power to quell fear, confusion, and turmoil. It has the power to quicken mercy and freshen love, to reconcile friends and spouses, parents and children, even whole kingdoms. The Eucharist has the power to change hearts and to change the world.

But you know that already. You are already well aware of what Pope St. John Paul II taught us, that the Eucharist is “the source and the summit of all evangelization” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, no. 22). However, I want to illuminate how the spirit of true festivity that we find in its highest form in the

Eucharistic feast has the power to evangelize culture in contexts outside the Mass and Eucharistic Adoration.

In order to see how this is so, we need to be even more precise about what we mean by festivity. We know that whatever it is, we find it in highest form in the Eucharist. But what exactly is it that we find there?

The 20th-century German philosopher Josef Pieper, an author we love well here at Christendom and one of those we love to quote at parties, gives us the secret in his beautiful little book, *In Tune with the World*: “Festivity is essentially a beholding, a contemplation, a loving and grateful affirmation of the goodness of all creation.” It is saying yes to all that God has made. Isn’t this just what we do when we celebrate, for example, a child’s birthday? The cake, the candles, the presents, the games—these are only the physical manifestations of that internal and invisible “Amen” to the life of the child. Why else would we celebrate someone’s birthday except to say, in effect, “I am so thankful you were born. I am so thankful you are part of God’s creation, and I thank God that I have this opportunity to behold you, contemplate your wonders, and give praise to God for what He has made.”

This loving, grateful beholding is the true and invisible festive spirit. This is what we are really thirsting for when we attend the Friday happy hour or toast a young couple at their wedding reception. We simply are trying to see all that is truly good in this world; not do anything with it but simply look at it, gape at it, turn it over lovingly in our hearts and our minds in thanksgiving for

it. A party isn’t actually necessary for festivity, though it surely is nice. But oftentimes festivity occurs in silence, when, for example, a couple married for many years sits together neither saying nor doing anything in particular, drinking up all that is good about one another, their children, and their grandchildren. To their entire life together, with all its joys and sorrows, what are they doing but proclaiming a silent and grateful yes?

We can see better now how the appearances of festivity, its physical form in the happy hour, concert, or celebratory dinner, can actually mask an unfestive spirit. In fact, partying hard can be a symptom of tremendous sadness. Pieper identifies such sadness with the age-old vice of *acedia*, often translated as “sloth.” Sloth is not laziness, as is often thought; it is rather a refusal to say yes to the goodness of all creation. Many seek festivity unfestively. While they may recognize certain things like pleasure, wealth, and honor as goods, they refuse to recognize the whole of creation—and, above all, the Author of that creation—as good. They view the world as a fundamentally hostile place in which the best one can do is take one’s comforts as one can. Pieper points out, interestingly, that *acedia* is a violation of the Third Commandment to keep holy the Lord’s Day. For what is the Lord’s Day but the day on which we take leisure in order to contemplate gratefully the goodness of all that is? Especially in that *eucharista*, that “thanksgiving” that Christ renders to the Father on our behalf in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?

**ABOUT PRINCIPLES** Animated by the joyful, lived experience of the faith, *Principles* draws on the fruits of an authentically Catholic liberal arts education to explore the ideas necessary to live a fully integrated Catholic life: one that upholds the value of human dignity, the role of virtue in private and public spheres, and the centrality of charity in both thought and action. We envision a Church—and a watching world—that embraces sound reason rooted in a robust faith.

True festivity, Pieper argues, is culture at its highest fulfillment. This means that when it comes to evangelizing present-day culture, our chief task is to attract the culture to the delights of the festive spirit. The culture we live in should most accurately be deemed an anti-culture, because it so adamantly and sadly refuses to say yes to the goodness of all that is. So, how are we to attract our anti-culture to festivity? I would like briefly to suggest three ways:

First, we must cultivate festivity in ourselves: above all in our own devotion to the Eucharist, but also by cultivating a contemplative spirit for the working day. For this, we need to stand guard carefully over our attention. Especially during this pandemic and our being more beholden than ever to digital technology, it's come to light that attention is one of our greatest treasures as human beings, and one of the things the anti-culture most wants to take from us. As we learn from the disturbing Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*, the big tech companies, especially social media companies, are working hard to manipulate our attention. Our attention is what they are selling to their advertisers, and they control our attention precisely by offering us sham versions of festivity. We don't need to be Luddite about technology, but most of us need to be much

more intentional about guarding our attention, not only from onslaughts by social media, but also from the incessant sensationalism of the news and the often impoverished offerings of popular entertainment. On the First Sunday of Advent, our Lord urged us in St. Mark's Gospel: "Be watchful! Be alert! ... May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping" (13:33, 36). With our attention secured, we have spiritual space opened for prayer, certainly, but also for cultivating a 24/7 sense of gratitude and a loving beholding of all the gifts God has given us. Such contemplation must necessarily produce joy, which, as Bishop Robert Barron likes to teach, is our most attractive quality when it comes to evangelization.

This contemplative joy, however, seeks an outlet, some physical form. This is where the parties and celebrations come in. It is also where poetry comes in and, indeed, all the arts. A second key way we can attract the anti-culture to festivity, therefore, is by the cultivation of beauty, especially in the arts. Referring to another point Bishop Barron likes to make, when appeals to truth and moral goodness fail to be heeded by those without the disposition to hear them, the attractiveness and apparent harmlessness of beauty remains persuasive. Here, too, *The Winter's Tale* serves as a guiding image. Even

before Hermione is “brought back to life,” she exists in her beholder’s eyes as a beautiful work of art. Indeed, Leontes is so taken by the beauty of what he thinks is a statue of his wife that he wants to act as if the statue were alive:

Still methinks  
There is an air comes from her.  
What fine chisel  
Could ever yet cut breath? Let  
no man mock me,  
For I will kiss her. (5.3.96-99)

The fine arts have this power— if I may, this kind of “eucharistic” power—to change us and inspire us to offer that “praise of the world” that is the essence of festivity. The fine arts plant in us “seeds of the Word” and thereby prepare us for the power of the ultimate Eucharist. We see this connection between contemplation and the fine arts

in the etymology of the word we use for the very art Shakespeare practiced: the art of the theatre. The English word “theatre” is derived from the ancient Greek verb *theôrein*, which literally means “to gaze upon.” In ancient Greek theatres, the area where the audience sat and gazed upon the play was called the theatron, the “gazing place.” For the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, contemplation, the highest and best of all of man’s virtuous activities, is named by another version of the verb *theôrein*: *theôria*. Thus, from ancient times the art of the theatre has been linked to that loving seeing that is contemplation. This is what the theatre is, the place where we go festively to contemplate the goodness of the human condition, whether in its comic or its tragic dimension. And this is what our practice of all the fine arts must be if we are to combat our unfestive anti-culture.

Of course, the fine arts are not the only arts of festive contemplation. The practice of the liberal arts, our calling here at Christendom College, is another form of festivity our culture very badly needs. So too are those smaller acts of loving attention that we find in activities as seemingly disparate as a dinner party in which good manners and conversation are deliberately practiced, a praise-filled walk through nature on a gorgeous day, and a celebration even in the sharing of an article such as this, where minds come together to contemplate the highest and best things. 

Photo on cover: Scene from *The Winter’s Tale*, Florizel and his fiancée Perdita dance at a fete.

# PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

## PRODUCTION MANAGER

Adam Wilson

## ART DIRECTOR

Niall O’Donnell

Copyright © 2021 Christendom College

The opinions expressed in PRINCIPLES are not necessarily the views of Christendom College.

For copying and reprinting permission, see [getprinciples.com/about](http://getprinciples.com/about).

SUBSCRIPTION FREE UPON REQUEST.

[GetPrinciples.com](http://GetPrinciples.com)



CHRISTENDOM  
COLLEGE

# LEARN HISTORY FROM A FAITHFUL CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE FOR FREE!

When you learn history in the light of your Catholic faith, your life is enriched and your faith deepened. History is more than wars, conflict, and bloodshed: it has a deeper meaning waiting for you to discover. See the world anew using faith AND reason with Christendom College president Dr. Timothy O'Donnell in a new, FREE online Catholic history class today!

Amidst movements that seek to sweep away the roots and reasons for your faith, you can still thrive as a Catholic by knowing, living, and sharing your faith.



FREE  
ONLINE  
CLASS

[PRINCIPLESCLASSES.COM](https://www.principlesclasses.com)



## PRAYER INTENTION

FROM COLLEGE  
PRESIDENT  
DR. TIMOTHY  
O'DONNELL

We pray for the Church and our nation in these troubled times; for Christendom to faithfully fulfill its mission; and for the health and safety of our entire Christendom family—students, faculty, staff, alumni, benefactors, and friends.

Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us.  
Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, pray for us.