

Grave and merry

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 1, 1999](#) issue

Recently I cohosted with actor John Mahoney (of the TV show *Frasier*) an annual event called "Jubilate." It supports Chicago's Bonaventure House, where the Alexian Brothers serve AIDS victims, who also serve each other. Each year such opera singers as Catherine Malfitano, Samuel Ramey and the friend who got me into all this, Susanne Mentzer, donate their services.

Lacking expertise in both opera and AIDS care, I introduced the program by exegeting an emotion I have each year when I am in the Jubilate audience or at similar events elsewhere.

How can we "rejoice"—which is what the psalm that gives us the word "jubilate" asks us to do and as the performers lead us to do—in the face of disease, the need for care, the images of suffering people?

In his book *Man at Play* theologian Hugo Rahner describes a person who embodies two apparently contradictory outlooks on life or features of personality. Such a person matches the two elements of living that come together at events like Jubilate. I quote (having translated "man" to "person"):

Existence is a joyful thing, because it is secure in God; . . . it is also a tragic thing, because freedom must always involve peril. . . . It is a mixture of joy and sorrow, a comedy and a tragedy in one; for there is no play that has not something profoundly serious at the bottom of it. . . .

There arises one characteristic of the person at play which I select . . . from a whole host of others; he who plays after this fashion is the "grave-merry" person. . . . Such a person is really always two people in one: he or she is a person with an easy gaiety of spirit, one might almost say a person of spiritual elegance, a person who feels herself or himself to be living in invincible security; but . . . is also a person of tragedy, a person of laughter and tears, a person, indeed of gentle irony, for this person sees through the tragically ridiculous masks of the game of life and has taken

the measure of the cramping boundaries of our earthly existence.

With that in mind we can listen to artists who are people of "spiritual elegance," singing "with an easy gaiety of spirit" for a cause in which the "merry" for an hour transcends that which is "grave." They give us license and motive to rejoice: Jubilate!

Most of us attend benefits, whether in congregations or through charities, at which the worlds of suffering and rejoicing come together. That Rahner theme helps me do the bridging between them, and it may work for you.