

Homo ludens: "Poised between gaiety and gravity"

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 5, 2001](#) issue

Prufrockian is a term that entered the vocabulary after the 1917 publication of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." It refers to the outlook of an aging, inhibited man who is too afraid of life, of himself and of what people would say and too fastidious to dare, to act. His acting had to do with potential erotic encounters. He asked of his own unpursued ventures: "Do I dare disturb the universe?"

Of course, the universe was not looking. Still, Prufrock, asking "'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?'. . . With a bald spot in the middle of my hair" is a paradigmatic figure for anyone who wonders "what will people say?"

I had a Prufrockian moment when my editor scheduled a recent "light" column I had written before September 11 and which had been filed until a more appropriate moment. Could such a time ever come? "What will readers think?," I wondered. "Is it appropriate now to publish something that might look frivolous? How can we best serve the memory of the dead, have empathy for the frightened and sorrowing and express our own insecurities? By being henceforth, and always, grave?"

One seeks a model for the future, if not to impress on others, to guide one's self. I revisited a passage that I have often pressed upon others as such a model, from *Man at Play*, by Hugo Rahner, S.J. (Herder & Herder, 1967). Was Pope John XXIII Rahner's model? The book attempts "a kind of psychography of Homo ludens," the human at play. (In reading the following passages from Rahner, mentally substitute "human" for "man.")

Rahner describes an "attitude that is poised between gaiety and gravity, between mirth and tragedy, and which the Greeks designated by the inimitable expression: *Aneer spoudogeloios*—the 'grave-merry' man. Such a man is capable of making his life into a game, and a very lovely one at that, because he knows that this life is either a comedy or a tragedy. 'Fun and gravity are sisters' [Plato]. . . . In Christian truth this apparent contradiction is resolved into that grave mirth from which the

tragic is wholly absent and which led Clement of Alexandria to speak of life as a 'divine children's game.'"

Rahner goes on, "I am trying to make plain that such a man is really always two men in one: he is a man with an easy gaiety of spirit, one might almost say a man of spiritual elegance, a man who feels himself to be living in invincible security: but he is also a man of tragedy, a man of laughter and tears, a man, indeed, of gentle irony, for he sees through the tragically ridiculous masks of the game of life and has taken the measure of the cramping boundaries of our earthly existence.

"If [one] is only the first of these two things, we must write him down as a frivolous person who has, precisely, played himself out. If he is only the second, then we must account him as one who cannot conquer despair. It is the synthesis of the two things that makes the Homo ludens, the 'grave-merry' man, the man with a gentle sense of humor who laughs despite his tears, and finds in all earthly mirth a sediment of insufficiency."

Rahner quotes Theodor Haecker: "'Humour cannot be thought of save in a temporal setting, yet is also one of those things that are unthinkable without eternity.'" So if you thought me a silly goose for having written about geese, be ready for more of such, since light-heartedness, to which this column sometimes aspires, is not a distraction from any kind of ministry but can be at the heart of it. Gravely-merrily, I dare.