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Wednesday December 17, 2014

The milk of human kindness goes sour

It's confession time: "Forgive me, Father, for I have lost patience with all those bloodsuckers who believe that the season of peace and goodwill entitles them to exploit the naïve and gullible..."

Is loss of patience a sin? So it would seem. The *Catholic On-Line Guide to Confession* lists 16 questions one should consider before confessing. The sixth asks, "Was I impatient, angry, envious, proud, jealous, revengeful...?"

Yes, I was, and I am, impatient. Especially with people who treat the milk of human kindness as something to suck dry.

I use the Delete button to get rid of spam e-mail without reading it. That's easy.

It's harder to ignore e-mails purportedly from people I know. A long-time correspondent wrote that she had been robbed in Turkey. Her passport and airline ticket were safe in the hotel vault, but the hotel wouldn't release them until she paid her bill. Could I send some money?

Another came from a former editing colleague, needing to pay bail in Spain.

In both cases, the spammers included enough just personal information to sound convincing. Yet both proved utterly fraudulent.

Appeals by regular mail also increase towards the year end. I used to extend to all charities the courtesy of reading what they had sent me. I don't bother doing that anymore. With a few exceptions, envelopes go into the recycle bin unopened.

Don't get me wrong. I still donate – quite generously, my accountant assures me every April – to my own choices of worthy causes. But I'm suffering from compassion fatigue.

Loss of patience may not be serious sin. Loss of compassion verges into dangerous territory.

Crossing a line

I reserve my lowest level of tolerance for unsolicited telephone calls. I can't ignore them. They interrupt meals and conversations. They demand attention. Who knows – it might be important....

Whenever I hear a recording, I hang up. But it feels rude to hang up on a real person. Even if he just wants to warn me about a problem with my Microsoft Windows program.

I've tried asking them to take me off their lists. It doesn't work.

I've tried arguing. If they really know all about my computer, I insist, they can tell me my computer's Internet Protocol (IP) number. They can't. But that doesn't deter them either.

When they ask, "And how are you today?" I've tried telling them. In exhaustive detail. Same result.

Some colleagues shared their own ways of discouraging unwanted calls.

"Does your mother approve of what you're doing?" one person asks.

"I advise them that this call is being recorded for law enforcement purposes," suggests another.

"I ask politely if I can put them on hold for a minute," offered a third. "Then I put the phone down and ignore it."

One correspondent suggested keeping a police whistle handy, to blow into the phone. “A vuvuzela would work equally well,” he added. (A vuvuzela, in case you’ve forgotten, is a plastic horn about two feet long that emits an eardrum-shattering blast of sound.)

Clearly, some of these “solutions” go beyond mere impatience to a desire to hurt the other person. To inflict suffering. To punish.

I’m not convinced that loss of patience is a sin. But I’m sure that a desire to harm others has crossed the line.

The provocation does not excuse the reaction. So forgive me, Father....

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YOUR TURN

After a few weeks without much mail, last week’s column about the “invisible ropes” that anchor various elements of our belief system got a full mailbag.

Vern Ratzaff called it “A powerful and evocative reminder of dates and events and meanings and celebrations. May your rope always lead to stability.”

Tom Watson wrote, “I love your ‘imaginary rope’ metaphor. I think we have a good number of them, and dare to suggest a few:

- The government cares about all citizens.
 - Everybody is equal before the law, so justice will prevail.
 - Only so-called uncivilized countries torture folks they have detained.
- I suspect others might well add to this list.”

Ted Wilson suggested, “One of those imaginary ropes is our present calendar. How people can extend it backwards to establish when biblical events took place baffles me. Almost all of the Bible was an oral history originally. Some of it was passed down for hundreds of years before being committed to paper... Even some of the New Testament was oral accounts given by witness who were not literate themselves. While I believe most of the events and all of the messages in the Bible to be true, I do not trust any of the numerical references.”

Margaret Carr offered a specific example, of a good kind: “I just came back home from visiting my youngest daughter and her family in Wisconsin, and one of the books I read to her 5 & 7 year old children was called The Invisible String. They quite understood that even though I live hundreds of miles away, we are connected by an invisible string of love for each other. Christians all over the world are also connected with an invisible string. It is just too bad that we cannot seem to realize that we are also connected to all people of the world and live like we believed it!”

Marjorie Gibson felt that Christmas season was a good time for “clinging to imaginary ropes around imaginary bedrock... I do not object, as long as we know what we are doing. The birth of a man like Jesus should be celebrated and revered; December 25th is as good a day as any -- especially when there is no way of doing better!”

Marjorie continued, “I love the Christmas Season. I sing the traditional songs, decorate my home with the traditional representation of the myth we are celebrating, and am the better for it. What makes it important for me, though, is the thought that one gifted and special man could change our world, if we ever follow what he stood for.”

Steve Roney questioned my claim that nothing in the Bible identifies the date of Jesus' birth: "Actually, there is, although the argument is complicated. The conception of John can be dated to a Jewish festival, Yom Kippur. The conception of Jesus can be dated to the conception of John. The birth of Jesus can be calculated from the conception, and it comes out to on or about the end of December."

Laurina Tallman also felt there was adequate evidence of dates: "My father .. spent several years of his retirement pinpointing the time of Jesus' birth based on the astronomy of the Bethlehem star. Only someone with his command of mathematics and physics -- he taught himself astronomy and interpolated ancient calendars in the process of his writing -- would be capable of following his dissertation. But it can be done. Other contemporary scholars have made similar forays into the field of study that led the Magi from the East..."

"My abilities lie more with the shepherds and the others who saw or dreamed of angels. Social and behavioural darkness brightens the shafts of luminous consciousness that foretell good news that people can be healed of their tendencies to fail their ideals for themselves in human relations, and that peace on earth and goodwill among humans can be realized.

"Neither of these mental 'ropes' is imaginary or magical, as the events reported in the Bible attest and as events ever since then confirm. Objective science and spiritual insight have replicable applications in the real world. The amazing thing to me is that both modes of knowing coalesce on the cosmic scale. On occasion (which implies, possibly, on all occasions), the movement of the stars and the movement of humans on the face of this tiny planet display meaningful synchronicity. Astronomy in our day has displaced astrology, but without acknowledging those meaningful juxtapositions when they do occur. The Bethlehem Star exemplifies that type of cosmic-earthly consonance.

"Jesus' birth was predicted and expected in Hebrew prophetic writing and lore; He was recognized as the fulfillment of those prophecies by Simeon and by Anna during his presentation in the Temple as well as by the eastern astrologists when they found Him by following a star westward. Both scientific and intuitive-prophetic learning about the universe assure us that the days will be lengthening and Light will increase after the solstice and after we celebrate His birth."

"Given the current commercialism associated with Xmas," Charles Hill wrote, "one would not expect any association with Christ!" Charles went on, "I had an in-law who operated a Christian book store. He told us that if it weren't for Christmas, there would not be any profits for the year."

George Brigham, in England, commented: "As far as I know there is no mid-winter festival in Islam -- perhaps because it is based on a lunar (rather than solar) calendar. When I lived in Bradford -- an English city with a very substantial Moslem population -- I was somewhat bemused to see halal butchers advertising 'Get your halal Christmas turkey here'!"

Finally, Sandy Warren particularly liked last week's psalm paraphrase: This is a stunning paraphrase of Psalm 126. You have captured the strange balance of joy and fear that comes with change. It applies in countless ways, large and small, across a lifetime. Well, hopefully we grow and change enough that it applies in countless ways. And, again hopefully, it applies to new ways of seeing and not only to the same few liberating lessons that seem to have to be learned and relearned."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The suggested psalm for the fourth Sunday of Advent isn't a psalm at all, but Mary's borrowing of Hannah's song, when Samuel was born. We commonly call Mary's song the *Magnificat*. Yes, I did a paraphrase of it too.

My body grows round with wonder;
my soul swells with thanksgiving.
For God has been so good to me;
God did not say, "She's just a girl."
Once I was a slip of a girl,
but now I am woman,
one who can bring forth new life.
In all generations, I am blessed.
How could anyone miss it --
this new life in me is divine. It is holy.
God grants new life to all who have never lost a child's wonder;
they will be born again, and again, and again.
God watches over them;
God's fierce love fills predators with sudden fear.
The miracle of birth levels our human differences:
tough men become tenderly gentle,
learned professors blurt out baby talk,
even politicians fall silent in awe.
But the small and helpless are wrapped warmly in soft blankets;
they are held lovingly in caring arms;
they drink their fill with eyes closed.
The rich, for all their wealth and status, can go suck lemons.
That is how God deals with all of God's faithful people,
all who do not put their faith in themselves.
So God has always done,
so God will always do,
from Sarah's miracle, to mine.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
