

Picking on Catholics

Confession

Believers spent centuries in a desperate, sometimes comical, often violent attempt to make sense of the relatively new Christian fiction. They did so by making stuff up as they went along. Not everyone agreed on which direction the evolving Christian fiction should take. Different groups with different opinions were pitted against each other in bitter disputes that often lasted for centuries. Predictably, the competing factions often felt so strongly about their own ideas that they felt compelled to kill members of the opposition.

For example, the church invented confession. At first, a Christian would confess all his sins once in his life, preferably toward the end, so that all committed sins, or at least all the major ones, could be forgiven in one fell swoop, leaving the Christian good to go. To heaven, hopefully.

Confession was a very practical invention by church leadership, which had also been invented. Bishops at first, then later the big decisions were made by the pope. Then someone invented a new, improved version of confession, which was available at any time, so sinners could lighten their load of transgressions at regular intervals. The advantages are obvious. For one thing, there was a lot less to have to remember throughout one's lifetime. (Not that deathbed confessions were telling God anything he didn't already know).

For every confessed sin, there was a penalty that must be paid. Penalties were standardized early on, so some sinners couldn't get off light just because they were wealthy or popular. In the early years, penance was quite rigorous and painful, unlike the wimpy penances handed out by priests today. Fasting was a very popular penance. Not fun, except for monks, who were heavy into self-inflicted pain.

All that seemed to be a very pragmatic solution to the sin that we are all guilty of by virtue of having selected Adam and Eve as our most ancient ancestors. But some people still weren't satisfied. Soldiers, for example, faced a dilemma, even with an elaborate confession program designed for their convenience. As soldiers, killing was an important skill, and they were called on to perform that function often, which they did with zeal and pride.

But as Christians, they also knew that killing was a sin, unless they were killing for God, which wasn't always a clear distinction. How to reconcile their profession and their religion? Sure, they could go to confession as often as necessary, and wipe the slate clean, at least for a while. But the penance tended to leave them weak and unable to fulfill their killing obligations at peak performance.

So, holy fiction writers came to the rescue again, adding another chapter to the Christian novel. Soldiers could simply hand off all that penance to masochistic monks, leaving the soldiers free to kill without guilt or hunger from fasting. The way they figured it, God didn't care who did the penance, as long as somebody suffered. It was a win / win situation, thanks to dedicated Christian fiction writers.

None of this confession and penance stuff is in the Bible. Funnily enough, even though God went to all the trouble of sending his son to live among men so that men would be able to understand God, and even though he sent the Holy Spirit to guide his earthly servants to write down the infallible word of God so that men would understand God, men still didn't understand much about God. There were still a whole lot of details that had to be worked out.

So the Catholic Church kept writing the Christianity fiction until they became the final authority (from their perspective at least) on all things God. And you can learn all about the greatest story ever sold at a Catholic church near you, where they have all the answers. (And if they don't have the answer, they invent one.)

Sign of the Cross

I see Catholics going around doing that strange little sign of the cross thing all the time. Watch any mafia movie, and you'll see it dozens of times. Those guys were (are?) some of the most devout Catholics of any time or place. It appears they had to be, because they were doing so much sinning that they had to appease the God (Father) as much as possible and go to confession regularly to wipe all those sins away. Then they were ready to go out and rack up some more sins, with God's blessing. What a sinner-friendly religion! It had to be, because some of the biggest sinners that ever lived were popes, cardinals, bishops, and priests.

What I'm wondering is this: Does that sign of the cross stuff really work? I mean, you Catholics do it to invoke divine blessing, right? So, it stands to reason that Catholics would have divine blessing out the wazoo. It seems reasonable to conclude that if that is effective, Catholics in general would be much better off than non-Catholics in some significant way(s).

For example, are you happier? Are you wealthier? Are you more powerful? Are you more intelligent? What do you Catholics have to show for all that crossing? There must be some clear manifestation of divine blessing derived from that practice. What is it? Because if there is none (and I don't see it), maybe you should consider just stopping it. Catholics have been wrong about stuff before. Lots of stuff. Maybe you guys are wrong about that too.

After all, how did that get started, anyway? Does God tell you in the Bible to do that? I don't remember reading that, and I've read the Bible a lot. Did a priest tell you to do it? Priests can be wrong. The prevalence of pedophile priests is proof of that. The pope can be wrong, too. Very wrong. It doesn't look like you are doing anything spiritual. It's more of a magical incantation. Maybe not even that. It looks like Catholics go to mass to get wound up so they can make the sign of the cross at regular intervals until the next mass. It looks mechanical, like you are just little wind-up dolls.

I'm just suggesting you might want to take a good hard look at that practice, reevaluate it objectively. Because if you aren't willing to do that, it's just a silly mannerism. More like a facial tick or an OCD thing than a devout practice.

On the other hand, if you Catholics can prove that it really works, maybe you Baptists should open a franchise. You need all the divine blessing you can get.