

**September 13, 2009**

The Sunday Before Holy Cross

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Except when governed by plain moral injunctions from the Almighty, most circumstances in life are open to more than one interpretation. This is true even when we are bridled by an immediate moral responsibility.

A simple example comes to mind: What is my ethical duty when faced with a manifest fool who insists on shooting off his mouth? My options appear to be many. The one thing the Gospels forbid me to do is say, "Thou fool!" Except for that curb on my rhetorical competence, the imagination is apparently free to consider other possibilities.

For managing a fool, a sound, solid beating leaps first to mind. Indeed, when discussion turns to this subject, Holy Scripture mentions certain measures appropriate for the fool's backside (Proverbs 10:13; 19:29; 26:3). Unfortunately, I confess, this preferred option is physically more difficult in one's later years: The arms, now feeble, can no longer reach up into the trees and break off suitable braches.

Short of thrashing the fool, then, just what can be done? That is to say, since Justice cannot be pursued in this case, the outcome must be determined by Plato's other three moral guides: Temperance, Prudence, and Fortitude.

What to do with a prating fool (fortunately rare, in my experience) will also depend somewhat on the available technical resources. Suppose, for instance, the fool in question manages his own blog site (nearly always the case nowadays), whereas I may not even own a computer.

This is tough. A limiting circumstance like this pretty much restricts my options to either kneeling in front of the altar to pray the Psalms or posting myself in front of the fool's house, around three in the morning, to practice scales on the trombone. Again a tough choice, at least to those of us with neither piety adequate for the first nor lips sufficient for the second.

Although Holy Scripture clearly favors beating the fool, it also leaves open the option that he may be "answered." Indeed, plain, definite, and unequivocal instructions are provided on this point: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (Proverbs 26:4-5). Moral doctrine doesn't get much clearer than this.

Let us consider the components of this teaching in sequence. I want to suggest, moreover, that the sequence of these two verses is significant:

First, we are instructed to look out for ourselves. Prior to any consideration for the fool, we must take care not to "be like him." Self-interest is to be our initial moral concern. Let Prudence prevail.

Indeed, the greater a fool's adherence to his folly, the riskier it is to answer him. We should bear in mind that the fool has already set the terms and agenda for his critics, so any reply will necessarily be made, in some measure, "according to his folly."

Answering a fool is very different from answering someone who just happens to be wrong, such as an innocent but ill-informed heretic. The latter can normally be answered with reasonable discourse and a friendly appeal to a shared authority. My answer may not persuade him of his error, but it is never wrong for me to attempt it. In fact, an ensuing discussion on the disputed point may prove enlightening to both of us. Divine grace may permit me even to convince a heretic, as Maximus did Pyrrhus.

In short, anyway, I am forbidden to answer the fool if the effort would put me at spiritual risk. It may even be prudent to avoid him altogether.

Second, I should be concerned for the welfare of the fool himself, "lest he be wise in his own eyes." Once I have duly consulted Prudence, it may be possible to answer the fool with Temperance and Fortitude. In making this determination, I will be guided by several considerations, such as the fool's age (Proverbs virtually presumes the young are foolish), his level of respect for the rudiments of language and logic, and any evidence he may show of vestigial honesty. Normally, charity may prompt us to make at least some initial effort to answer the fool, if we discern a providential opening.

St. Paul gives a useful rule in this respect: "Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned" (Titus 3:10).

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