

November 15, 2009
First Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the evils associated with the sin of murmuring (arguably the vice most often condemned in Holy Scripture), first place probably goes to the disposition of murmurers to feed the grievances of one another.

Fred and Ralph, for example, may entertain very different grievances against George. Perhaps Fred thinks George too flamboyant, whereas Ralph considers him overbearing. As long as Fred and Ralph don't meet and talk about George—as long as the two of them just murmur individually—George can probably handle the problem. Kept separate, these two sources of complaint have only an accumulative force—let's say, seven plus seven. It may be the case that George can handle an accumulated complaint calibration of fourteen. Suppose, however, Fred and Ralph get together, and the discussion somehow turns to the subject of George. We may construct their conversation as follows:

"Say, Fred, what do you think of George?"

"Oh, George is a very fine gentleman, Ralph, and a real prince of a guy, even if he strikes some folks as a tad flamboyant."

"Yes, George is a sterling character, an ace of a fellow, which is why people overlook it when he gets a bit overbearing on occasion."

"Well, that's how it is with flamboyant people, isn't it? They don't know when to stop. Flamboyance leads to an inflated self-image. Before long it can really get on your nerves."

"That is the truth of the thing. I don't know many people as nerve-wracking as George. I can hardly stand him."

"Yep, let's face it: That George is a real creep. Especially with his bad breath, it's a wonder he has any friends."

"Name one. I can't think of anybody who likes George, or admits it. The jerk has absolutely no redeeming qualities."

Yep, that pretty much sums up George.

Now this is how it goes when murmurers congregate. The trick of virtue here is

to keep Fred and Ralph apart, because the inference of their conjunction is not accumulative, but squared. Their combined number is not fourteen, but forty-nine.

There is a clear example of such a conjunction in Holy Scripture. I am thinking of the marching and camping arrangement of the Chosen People in the desert. According to the Book of Numbers, the tribes of Gad, Reuben, and Simeon marched and camped on the south side of the Tabernacle (2:10-16). The tribe of Reuben, which occupied the middle position, was thus placed adjacent to the Levitical family of the Kohathites, which marched and camped between the Reubenites and the Tabernacle (3:29). As it turned out, this physical proximity proved to be dangerous for some of the Reubenites and Kohathites.

For starts, each group had its own complaints. The children of Reuben, Israel's first-born son, felt unjustly demoted when Moses gave the position of leadership---on the east side of the camp---to the tribe of Judah (2:3). Two Reubenites, named Dathan and Abiram, especially murmured about this.

Their physical position in camp, moreover, put them right beside the Kohathites, who were nursing a grievance of their own. These murmured that another Levitical family, the family Aaron, was accorded the dignity of the priesthood and were placed to the east of the Tabernacle. One of the Kohathites, a certain Korah, was especially incensed about this.

Unfortunately for all these murmuring individuals, they talked with one another---and compared notes---about Moses and Aaron.

Perhaps neither group, by itself, would have become openly rebellious to the Lord's appointment, nor did they rebel for a long time.

In due course, however---perhaps when they realized none of them would reach the Promised Land alive (14:28-29)---they began to feed one another's sense of frustration, finally undertaking a desperate and disastrous rebellion. They all came to a very bad end (16:1-35).

When earth and fire devoured those confederate murmurers, the event simply revealed, for all to see, their actual spiritual state. As each disgruntled element fed on the other, they were both finally consumed. This is what murmurers do.

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