

July 24, 2011
Christina of Tyre

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Basing my attitude on the assumption that "it is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority' (Acts 1:7), I steadfastly avoid calculations about the end time. I just don't run in those circles.

Consequently, it seems I missed a deadline, not long ago. Either the Rapture was supposed to occur, or the world was going to end, or something equally catastrophic was supposed to befall us, and I missed the whole thing. At least, I *think* I missed it, in the sense that I was one of two men standing in a field that day, and neither of us was taken (Matthew 24:40). Anyway, I did not become aware of the deadline until it had passed.

It is significant that I learned of it from a TV comedian, who used the occasion to joke about the gullibility of religious people.

If I did not think the joke especially funny, it is because of an impression that religion has nothing to do with most contemporary speculation about impending disasters. Leave religion out of it. Most of the present world's preoccupation with apocalyptic signs has nothing to do with the Book of Daniel.

Readings from Daniel have been replaced by a stream of reports from the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), which spell out exactly what we mortals must expect to befall us---very soon---from Avian Flu, Mad Cow Disease, Belgian Dioxins, leaded gasoline, inadequate fiber, cheeseburgers, asbestos in Chinese toys, second hand smoke, and mercury traces in our corn flakes.

As in former times apocalyptic fear was bolstered by the authority of the prophet, in the contemporary world it is enforced by the authority of science.

The old arrangement was better, I think, in its provision that the prophet, if his prophecy turned out to be bogus, was supposed to be stoned to death. Maybe the Food and Drug Administration should brush up on certain verses in Deuteronomy.

Is it my imagination, or is it true that secular apocalyptic expectations have increased since we entered a new century a little over a decade ago? I especially recall the widespread scare that all our computers would crash at midnight, as we moved into January 1, 2000. This was supposed to be really bad: our bank accounts would disappear into the stratosphere, our street lights would suddenly malfunction, and hundreds of planes would plunge from the sky. None of this happened, though there were reports of increased skin rash

from babies' diapers. Anyway, the fear was renewed by the consideration that the new millennium would not, in fact, begin until a year later.

In 2005 the World Health Organization proclaimed that the "the deadly H5N1 strain" of bird flu virus would be "the single greatest health challenge" to the human race. Its lethal attack on the masses of mankind, according to Britain's chief medical officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, was "a biological inevitability." I am sorry to report that some selfish individuals in Chicago survived by taking the easy out: They got rid of their canaries and kept the windows closed. Oh sure, they're still alive, if you want to call it life.

These and other instances of modern apocalyptic morbidity are explored by Christopher Booker and Richard North in their fascinating book *Scared to Death*, published two years ago.

Of all the contemporary manifestations of apocalyptic morbidity, however, none seems to stir more fascination than the Global Warming Scare. Indeed, Al Gore may be thought of as our new Peter: "the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10).

The hour of judgment, we are told, is soon upon us. We must repent and bring forth the fruits of righteousness. For lo, the ice cap is melting, the rain forest is dried up, the ozone is nearly gone, and dead polar bears are daily washed ashore on the sands of Corsica. And all because of our dastardly carbon footprint.

I have not the foggiest idea, of course, how much scientific substance there is to any of this. At the very least, I suspect a lot of contrary evidence is being ignored.

I am far more interested in what appears to be a deep social morbidity that gives so quick a positive response to every secular prophecy of impending disaster. As a symptom of our spiritual health, this gloomy spirit---this prior near-certainty that something bad is about to happen---strikes me as more curious that any of the catastrophes currently prophesied. As a moral symptom, it is certainly more serious.

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