

Sizzle or Shiver?

It was 1975. I had just returned to the United States after a year spent studying in Paris. There I sat sweating in the chapel of Middlebury College, attending the graduation ceremony at which I would receive my M.A. in French. We were addressed by a perspiring speaker who used a term which has stuck with me ever since: “infernally hot”. Of course, my mind leapt to Dante’s Inferno, where the reader is taken on a tour of hell – which, as you know, is reported to be hot. I am reminded of this as I think about the infernal heat of August. I hate the heat. I hate summer. (Could I be part Eskimo?)

Paradoxically, I don’t like air conditioning either, especially when it turns a room into a glorified refrigerator. And the refrigeration makes the heat seem even worse: it slaps you in the face as soon as you go outside! You can imagine how happy I was the summer I worked in a supermarket: I would run back and forth between a sweltering parking lot and the frozen foods section. I’m not sure which was worse – the sizzling or the shivering! This, of course, reminds me of the poem by the aptly-named Robert Frost:

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

It’s comforting to know that at least one other person is as schizophrenic as I am! Be that as it may, let’s check out these two scenarios.

There is an awful lot of wrangling lately. Turn on the TV and you’re likely to see people screaming at one another. From reality TV to political commentators, people try to advance their position by vanquishing their adversaries. I personally doubt that one can learn anything worthwhile from such sorry displays: for all their claims to shed light on the human condition or current events, such shows provide more “heat” than light. In the “heat” of the moment, the commentators and contestants resort to abuse of others to get their own way. Thank God that we’re not like that – or are we?

At the other end of the pendulum swing, we find the “cold shoulder”. Instead of sins of “commission” done in the “heat” of an argument, the “cold shoulder” is more like deliberate sins of “omission”: we refuse to associate with people, turning our backs on them – in other words, “cold-heartedly” excluding them from our lives. We’ll show them: we’ll deprive them of the pleasure of our company! Problem: when we learn how to do this to one person, we start doing it to others as well, and pretty soon we find that we ourselves have ended up isolated and “out in the cold”. See how smart we were!

As we have seen, heat and cold can be – and often are – used as weapons against other people. This need not be the case; warmth and coolness can also be a blessing, a gift which we offer in friendship. When the feverish pace of modern life has reduced us beyond heat exhaustion, how welcome is an invitation from someone who cares; our friend becomes like a life-giving oasis whose cooling shade and refreshing water revive

us! When our life seems as bleak as a cold, barren winter, how welcome is a gesture or an expression of human warmth; it is as though springtime had come to thaw our freezer-burned hearts, bringing forth an abundance of flowers!

Grace or curse, blessing or weapon, building up or tearing down? It depends on what we do with the gifts which God provides. Let us choose wisely!

-Fr. Jim Karepin, op