

March Madness

We, of course, are concerned these days with the Great Fast – since we are either in the midst of it or preparing for it, depending on the calendar option chosen for our particular parish. Meanwhile, life goes on all around us, totally oblivious to - and perhaps even scornful of - our efforts at spiritual self-improvement. Of course, there is basketball: in my beloved Mishawaka, Indiana, Hoosier Hysteria is certainly at a highpoint, as the state high school championships get everyone whipped up to a fever pitch; on the college level, the NCAA championship countdown goes from “sweet sixteen” to “elite eight” to “final four” to “the big dance”. Then there’s St. Patrick’s Day...

As March 17th approaches, one begins to see multi-cultural people sporting tee-shirts and buttons beckoning: “Kiss me, I’m Irish!” Of course, this would seem to give credence to the assertion that “there are two kinds of people in the world: those who are Irish, and those who wish they were”. Being of Boyko ancestry, I would obviously – even without prior consultation - be relegated to the second category. Being both a former language teacher and a Dominican given to hairsplitting, I am led to reflect upon the difference between wishing and hoping as reflected in English grammar.

Wishing deals with situations which grammarians would refer to as “contrary to fact”: if I were to say “I wish I were Irish”, that would not change the fact that I am not indeed Irish, and never will be. The impossibility of this wish is reflected in the fact that proper grammar requires us to use “I were” instead of the usual “I was”. Wishing does not and cannot change the reality, and our way of speaking forces us to recognize this fact. There are, after all, things which we cannot change, no matter how hard we try. I am reminded of this painful truth every time a French native, obviously ignorant of the years of study and effort required for earning me an M.A. in French, tramples on my linguistic aspirations and illusions by remarking: “Oh, what a charming foreign accent! Where are you from?” Grrr!

Hoping is a whole different ball of wax: instead of an impossible situation, we are dealing here with a possibility. If I say, “I’m going to buy a lottery ticket: I hope I’ll win!”, the use of the future tense shows that the door is not entirely closed on the possibility of winning; however slight the possibility, it remains alive, buoyed by hope. With regard to my French abilities, I need to give up my delusions of perfection and my unrealistic expectations – in other words, my wishes; however, I can continue to hope that I will speak a bit less badly tomorrow than I did yesterday. (As for getting smelly French cheese beyond my American-born nose, no way!)

In a sense, the Great Fast is about this very difference between hoping and wishing, between possible and impossible, between realistic and unrealistic. Our desire for conversion must come to grips with the fact that certain things cannot be changed, no matter how hard we try: we were born at a certain time in a certain place to certain people, and so we start out with

basic hereditary underpinnings, upon which have been piled past formative experiences. And then there's what time has done to our aging bodies and our less-than-reliable memories ... yikes! None of these factors can be changed, and it is useless – indeed perilous - to deny them. What can be changed, however, is our way of dealing with this inevitable baggage: do we persist in carrying it in the hardest and most cumbersome way possible just because we've always done it that way, thus ending up heavily burdened ourselves and becoming a burden upon others, or do we find new ways, better ways, healthier ways which make everybody's life better – including our own?

The Great Fast, then, is not about wishing that I were different; rather, it's about hoping that I will be able to **find ways to use better the potential which God has mysteriously placed within the gift of my life in order to help me grow toward the fullness of life which God desires for me – and for all of us.** Which, of course, leads us to the serenity prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” Sounds like a good Lenten exercise to me; does it to you?

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