

The Numbers Game

« How many Valentines did you get ? » This was a burning question which arose every February in my grade school class, because the number of Valentines symbolized one's popularity – i.e., one's worth : somehow, the more Valentines one received, the more important a person one was, as determined by one's relative popularity. Pity the poor girl who, having just arrived from « the old country », knew nothing of these bizarre American customs ; since she sent no Valentines, neither did she get any, and her social value plunged along with her already-abysmal popularity.

There were, of course, other indelicate questions aimed as through the crosshairs at the vulnerable student, answers which were matters of social life-or-death for us in that pre-adolescent microcosm : « How many trading cards (or - in those sexist times - dolls for the girls) do you have ? », « How many books have you read (records have you bought) ? », « How many trophies (merit badges, etc.) have you earned ? », « How many candy bars (raffle tickets, etc.) have you sold ? » There is a not-so-subtle subtext underlying each of these questions : it is assumed that a higher number is an indication of a quality person who is worthy of my time and attention, while a lower number places you lower on the social ladder - and thus off my list of priorities. By asking you this question, questioners are sizing you up, comparing you to themselves, and adjusting the pecking order accordingly.

As I got older, significant numbers morphed into class ranking and GPA. For adults interested in «keeping up with the Joneses », the number of televisions in the house and the number of cars in the driveway came to show status. For Imelda Marcos, of course, her significant collection of shoes was an indicator of her status – not unlike Elizabeth Taylor's collection of husbands. All of these, in my humble opinion, are about as life-giving as the collection of notches on the handle of a gunslinger's six-shooter. Things and people and honors were, and indeed still are, collected to give us a feeling of importance ; if I were into numerical pecking orders, I could indiscreetly ask « How many friends do you have on Facebook ? » or « How many tweets have you gotten today ? » Even Church circles are not exempt ! I remember one parish council meeting where people were all screaming « We need to get more people to come to our Church ! » (My interpretation : more people in Church, bigger parish membership to brag about, more money in the collection basket.) Always the imp, I of course asked the uncomfortable question concerning the inconvenient truth : « Do we want members for us or for them – for our well-being or theirs? » (As Mark Twain would say, let us pull the curtain of charity over the rest of the spectacle.) Needless to say, I am unimpressed by numbers ; besides, statistics can be used to bolster even contradictory arguments. What I now write I have probably written before, but it bears repeating : yeast is my favorite image of the Kingdom of God. You see, it doesn't take much yeast to raise the dough, but the yeast must be alive ; two tons of dead yeast may be impressive to look at, but it will have no effect on the dough, and is thus useless. Now, what were you saying about Church membership ?

Do my comments get a « rise » out of you ? I hope so, for that is our vocation as Church : to be leaven to enliven a burdened world groaning under the weight of

The Numbers Game

hopelessness. We can't win at the numbers game ; that's OK, because we have more important things to be concerned with. (How do you spell « salvation »?)

-fr. Jim Karepin, op