

Grace Notes in Miniature

Friday, November 13th, 2020

Dear Friends:

Any *paraskevidekatriaphobics* or sufferers of *friggatriskaidekaphobia* out there? For the uninitiated, that is the fear of Friday the thirteenth, and is thought to relate to either the presence of thirteen people (Judas being the 13th) at the Last Supper, or to a Norse legend involving Loki, the trickster god, being the 13th— and uninvited— guest at a dinner party in Valhalla. Fear of the number 13 affects numbering of houses, elevator floors, and the decks of cruise ships making it one of the most powerful superstitions. The Savoy Hotel in London, England, has a carved, black cat named Kaspar who has been the fourteenth guest at any dinner party which might otherwise have thirteen guests! Many atheists will dismiss faith as being superstition; however, the differences can be easily pointed out: superstition is irrational, usually based on fear, whereas faith is based on knowledge, reason and relationship. Bishop Robert Barron gives a very good explanation in this short video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4PSgFjtvI>¹

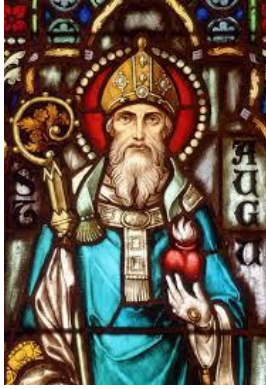
As he says, faith includes reason and then goes beyond it. Within our Catholic (small -t) tradition, there is the potential to move from faith to superstition when we ascribe magical properties to a practice. For instances, praying respectfully to St Anthony to help you find something is faithful; “Tony, Tony look around; something’s lost and must be found” is rather irreverent, and borders on belief in magic. Likewise, asking St Joseph to assist with the sale of your house is like asking help from a friend; burying his statue in the garden seems rather far removed from something we would do to a friend and becomes more a superstitious practice!² Some things which we consider superstitions may actually reflect an issue of safety: the soldiers’ belief that you shouldn’t light three cigarettes with the same match was based on not allowing an enemy sniper to triangulate successfully on the group in the dark and to shoot one or more of them. And not walking under a ladder lessens your chances of having something dropped on you – or getting entangled in the ladder and causing some on it to fall off. Breaking a mirror can be bad luck – if you manage to cut yourself on the broken glass,



Jesus made an announcement of betrayal at the Last Supper. Judas is seen seated at the opposite side of the table. David Lees/Corbis/VCG/Getty Images

¹ You can find a longer, more developed lecture at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dp21zP50cSE>

² <https://faithmag.com/are-catholic-superstitions-ok>



“Faith is a relationship, which needs to be expressed. It touches our fears and longings, but in the context of freedom. Superstition also seeks the divine but does not trust the relationship. It uses symbols and acts to manipulate the relationship, instead of entering into a divine-human dialogue. Manipulating the mystery is not faith, but superstition. By seeking security above mystery, superstition loses both. Superstition seeks to take away the freedom from God. By seeking control, it tries to become God above God.”³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hk7EUvww8>

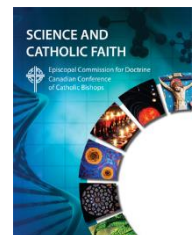
Augustine was seen in the 4th century as one of the great minds of faith, yet in his *Confessions* he wrote, “I wish I could be made just as certain of things I cannot see as I am certain that

$7+3=10$.” It is interesting that he would use a mathematical

example as mathematicians tell us that even the obvious may not always be as clear as it seems. He also wrote “Faith is to believe what we do not see, and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe.” We can apply that to the experience of the man in Mark 9:23-25, seeking to have his child healed. Rather than being attributed to irrationality, faith is recognised by many philosophers as being the result of rational thought and reflection: to continue with quotations from Augustine, “To wisdom belongs the intellectual apprehension of things eternal and, to knowledge, the rational apprehension of things temporal.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUPIkkVL9IO>

It is unfortunate that some believe that science and faith are incompatible and will relegate all faith to the realm of superstition. It helps to remember that science began as a subset of philosophy and that many of the scientific and technical innovations which occurred prior to the scientific revolution of the mid-sixteenth century were introduced from religious roots. Roger Bacon, a Franciscan, is often considered responsible for formalising the scientific method, and many of the individual elements are credited to Islamic academe and Christian sources. The first European universities, after all, were frequently centres of theology, canon and civil law, developing out of the schools of cathedrals and monasteries. It wasn't until after the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformations that rational enquiry, research and experimentation overcame the primacy of theology, philosophy and law in these institutions of higher learning. A booklet on *Science and Catholic Faith*, and supporting posters can be found at <https://secure.cccb.ca/pubs/pdf/185-124.pdf> and <https://esubmitit.sjpg.com/cccb/index.aspx?component=ProductDetails&id=184-968> Note that the downloads are free, although the coloured booklet can be purchased. Enjoy!

With every blessing,
Gillian



³ <https://www.thebostonpilot.com/opinion/article.asp?ID=188689>