

Letter to the Bishop

by Joe Ecclesia

Fax for Pax



Your Excellency:

Recently you offered Mass at our church. In your homily, which was quite inspirational, you urged parishioners to avail themselves more frequently of the Sacrament of Penance.

Believe it or not, Your Excellency, I try to go to Confession every month or so. As you stated in your homily, frequent confession helps us all in our battle against sin. Recently, however, I have felt uncomfortable confessing to our parish priests. Part of what I need to confess is my anger with these gentlemen over various issues: They have, for instance, made the Sunday Mass their version of a comedy club, and, since the younger of the two changed the words of the Eucharistic prayer at the last Mass, I'm not even sure whether the consecration was licit. Given my reservations, I find it difficult to go to these priests in the confessional. With a few mortal sins on my soul, however, I needed to look somewhere for absolution if I wished to partake of the other Sacraments. (Unlike most Catholics, who, by all appearances, march triumphant and unstained by sin down the aisle each Sunday to partake of Our Lord's Body and Blood, I'm afraid that I sin quite frequently and even enjoy it at times.)

I first turned to a large church nearby, with some newly appointed priests. The church secretary—a very genial woman—asked me to suggest several convenient times for Confession and then told me that the priest would check his schedule and would match one of my convenient times to one of his convenient times. I tried to call the next week to leave my convenient times, failed to reach the correct secretary, and later simply dropped by the rectory while on errands in that city. The priest was in the building and was available—the genial secretary told me so—but he couldn't see me without an appointment.

In the meantime, a priest substituted at our church one day when I happened to attend daily Mass. It was a First Friday, when we have Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and special prayers following morning Mass. *Aha*, thought I, *here's my chance!* I'll see this priest right after the spoken prayers, make my confession, perform my penance, and be once again clean as—well, not clean as the driven snow, perhaps, but at least, as Tallulah Bankhead once put it, clean as the driven slush.

Unfortunately, the priest didn't tarry for the prayers. He darted from the church while the rest of us were still on our knees. I'm sure his haste was justified—he was doubtless dashing off to somewhere important—but his rapid departure left me once again bereft of Confession.

And so here I am, Your Excellency, walking around sorry for my sins but unable to find a confessor. I thought about e-mailing my confession to you, but I decided that wouldn't do. I might add that I am making a trip soon, driving our daughter home from college. Should I happen to die out there on the asphalt, unshriven and alone, I ask for your prayers.

Given my dilemma, which I assume others like me have encountered, I came up with an idea. Why not direct all the priests of the diocese to sit in confessional booths 30 minutes before each Mass? You could kill two or even three birds with this single stone. You could make Confession readily available. You could encourage Confession. You might even give your priests a half-hour of rest each day, if no one came to Confession. Since I assume that our priests are supposed to talk to Our Lord somewhere between balancing the budget and getting the rectory gutters cleaned, you would also be providing them with a golden opportunity for contemplation and prayer.

Unfortunately, this suggestion may prove too great a hardship on our priests. When I mentioned my idea to the president of our parish council, she snorted and said, "The boys would never go for that!" She then proceeded to tell me that she had gone to Saturday afternoon Confession as a girl 60 years ago and that she saw no reason why people couldn't go on Saturdays today.

So let me offer another idea for your consideration. How about a fax line for Confession? We could print the fax num-

ber for Confession in all the parish bulletins, station a priest in a diocesan office with the fax machine, and have Confession available around the clock. Parishioners could fax in their confession and an Act of Contrition, and the priest could fax back absolution. Judging from the line for Saturday night Confession at our parish, this priest would not be especially busy. If he became overburdened, the diocese could simply provide him with a standard form for absolution. Special cases could be remanded to the parish priest. To attract attention, we might call it *Fax for Pax*.

Such an option might also make more Catholics aware of the nature of sin, Your Excellency. Comparing the length of the Communion lines on Sunday morning with the length of the confessional line on Saturday night, an impartial observer would conclude that Catholics are either the most perfect of God's people or the most ignorant. Since the latter option strikes me as closer to the mark—many of my fellow Catholics apparently feel that the only sin left is murder, and, even there, they would doubtless make allowances if you were a nice guy and shot a decent game of golf—we might use Fax for Pax to inform people that the old-fashioned sins of gossip, slander, covetousness, lusting in your heart after your neighbor, failing to honor God, and all the rest are still in play as rules of the game.

Take it into consideration, Your Excellency! Keeping you in my prayers,

Joe Ecclesia

Letter From the Drug War

by Brian Kirkpatrick

The Town I've Never Seen



I shouldn't have been surprised; I'd heard similar stories from my wife. But the more dramatic stories had always involved someone I didn't know. This was a seven-year-old girl giving an eyewitness account at

the dinner table.

"The guerrillas came to Aunt Lucy's house and told her to fix supper for thirty people," my stepdaughter said, in response to nothing in particular.

I must have done a comical double take. "Did your aunt do it?"

"Yes," she said, as she tore a piece of bread.

"Did the guerrillas show up?"

"They came to eat."

She was so matter-of-fact, so calm. This was just another story to her.

"She fed the soldiers?" I asked. It was not a brilliant question, but I was still struggling with my astonishment.

My stepdaughter wrinkled her nose with amusement. "They weren't soldiers! They didn't have helmets!"

"Were you scared?" I asked.

"No. Mommy, why does he call them soldiers?"

"They were soldiers," my wife said.

My stepdaughter shook her head. "They were wearing caps, not helmets."

I knew whom she was talking about, even if she didn't know what to call them. The soldiers she had seen belonged to FARC—las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—the bigger of the two communist guerrilla groups that have kept Colombia in a state of smoldering civil war for 40 years.

My stepdaughter's aunt lives in Anolaima, a town two hours outside of Bogota. My wife and stepdaughter were both born in Bogota, but my wife has dozens of aunts, uncles, and cousins in Anolaima. For some reason, my mother-in-law is the central sibling of 12 brothers and sisters, the queen bee of her generation. My wife holds that position in her own age group. My stepdaughter has the same status among her many cousins, even though she now lives on another continent.

My stepdaughter popped another grape into her mouth. "They came at 12:30 and left at 3:30."

"What did they do while they were there?" I asked.

"They ate. Some of them were just twelve years old, but they had mean faces."

"I bet."

I asked her more questions, but she didn't have anything to add. Seven-year-olds aren't investigative reporters. Later, my wife explained that the soldiers had come to the church where her uncle is the pastor. They ate and then they left, but they returned in the evening and kept the family captive overnight. My wife's

relatives were terrified, especially as one of the older soldiers kept eyeing the 13-year-old daughter, but the next day the guerrillas left for good. Within a month, soldiers—probably the same ones that Aunt Lucy fed—executed another family that had fed an anti-FARC paramilitary group. It didn't matter that the murdered family had no more choice about feeding their unwelcome guests than my wife's relatives had when FARC showed up.

For 20 years, when Americans have thought about Colombia, they have thought of the international drug trade. A few years ago, our journalists liked to write about the Rodriguez Orejuela clan in the southern Colombian city of Cali. Later, Medellin's Pablo Escobar, the sometime member of the Colombian national assembly, briefly held our attention. Now, much of the cocaine and marijuana trade belongs to FARC, ELN, the other major insurgency—or, I should say, the other crime syndicate—and the right-wing paramilitary organizations that developed in response to the first two groups. The two rebel groups claim that poverty and oppression are the root causes of their war, but the truth is that the drug trade gives them enough money to buy the guns, jeeps, food, and medical supplies that make them so formidable.

Several times, the guerrillas have stopped my wife on the road to Anolaima. They stop everyone: Cocaine brings in more money, but kidnapping is another strong revenue stream. One of my wife's stories is about the rich man from Anolaima whom FARC shot just outside of town. They didn't let anyone come close enough to bury him for days. Because of such stories, FARC doesn't have to kidnap you to make money; extortion makes a nice profit, too. Most Colombians who are threatened are understandably inclined to pay up.

We Americans play a role in my wife's stories about Anolaima. As long as our country has a voracious appetite for cocaine and marijuana, someone will sell them to us. If the drugs are illegal, the price will be high, and men like the leaders of FARC will do whatever they have to do to get a share of the money. Much of our own violent crime is the result of illegal drugs and the money that surrounds them, but cocaine also feeds and arms FARC's soldiers. We pay for the guns carried by the boys with caps.

Not all of my wife's Anolaima stories are sad. My favorites are about the party that's held every New Year's Eve in the

town square, where the people gather to dance all night. Anolaima has the same weather all year round—eternal spring—so an open-air party on New Year's, which would sound foolish here in Baltimore, makes sense there.

I'd love to see Anolaima, but I can't go there. It's too dangerous. I might make it home if FARC got their hands on me, but it would be months later, after I had raised thousands of dollars in ransom. It's more likely that I would die in the mountains at the hands of a 12-year-old with a mean face. And as I looked at the gaping hole in the end of the gun barrel, I would wonder which American had paid for the bullet.

Brian Kirkpatrick writes from Baltimore, Maryland.

Letter From London

by *Andrei Navrozov*

A Northern Light



Living in Italy, as I have done for some years, may result in an incremental loss of the vivid sensation, in my view all but indispensable in a writer, that the world as a whole is a barbarous place. It is then that I feel I must go back to London, to immerse myself afresh in the savage and godless existence that I seek to describe, to gamble side by side with my socially brutalized hero, and to cheer him on even as I watch him thrashing about within the vicious circle of cosmopolitan heartlessness, cultural sterility, and northerly frustration. For the unhappy personage whom I call the "poet player" is, after all, something of my own alter ego, my approximate kith and vaguely recognizable kin. I cannot but experience his predicament as my life's own.

Western civilization, which conceived itself in the primordial sunlight of the Mediterranean, can be explained to a visitor from another planet as an infinity of variations on a single theme, and that theme is fertility. This means that every flower, both literally and figuratively, will some day turn to fruit, which will then, as a general rule, come to ripen; that every undertaking, whether individual or communal, whether of the body or of the