

The Peter Principle

All across America this Valentine's Day platoons of men will stand at the counters of flower shops and grocery stores, clutching cards, chocolates, and roses to their chests, tokens of affection for their wives and lady friends (and sometimes, no doubt, for both). Their dilatory homage to the patron saint of love always brings a smile to my face, for before my wife died I numbered myself among them, a comrade who several times remembered late in the day that his beloved ranked this feast of hearts behind only her birthday and our wedding anniversary.

February also brings Mardi Gras, or Carnival, that pre-Lenten festival whose etymology stems from the Latin *carne*, meaning meat or flesh. We in the West, and particularly in these United States, have made a fetish of this holiday, obsessed as we are with carnal desires and deeds. We celebrate Carnival not only on Fat Tuesday, nor for a week or so previous, but year-round. Christian reverence for the Incarnation pales at the obeisance paid by postmoderns to Eros and the senses. On the altars of their imaginations, in movies and television, and on 10,000 pornographic websites, these carniphiliacs worship lips, tongues, breasts, buttocks, legs, and genitalia. In mimicry of Saint Paul, they say, "So flesh, lust, and sex abide, but the greatest of these is sex."

Our 50-year-old sexual revolution has left us foundering. Our culture has demolished the old codes—chivalry, courtly and romantic love, Christian marriage—and has erected in their stead a perverse sexuality and a brutalized sense of personhood. The once-popular song "What's Love Got To Do With It?" might serve as the anthem for our hardened hearts. Sexting and hooking up are only the most recent manifestations of our debauched infatuations. Even among my students, many of whom hail from strong Christian families, this twisted carnal-

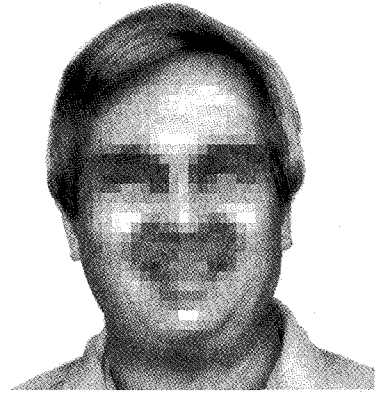
ity prevails. Students quote the New Testament, but listen to the same ugly rap music as their peers; they go to church three times per week, but grind-dance at their prom; they stoutly defend Christian morality, but practice secular sexual mores.

When confronted by this doctrine of desire and sex, the Catholic Church, progenitor of "Theology of the Body," blushes and blunders like a teenage boy fumbling at a cheerleader's brassiere. Lately, the Church's stammering and confusion has become my own. Last week, for instance, I met my friend Philip at the Bier Garden. "Caroline and I have gotten close," he said after our first round of Heinekens. "Maybe too close. We've done some things. Not everything. I mean, we haven't actually engaged in intercourse." With embarrassment he looked from me into the mirror behind the bar. "Man, I sound like a biology textbook. Anyway, I went to Confession last Saturday and told the priest. Not the details—I mean, he knew what I was saying without the particulars. Finally, I finished, and the first thing he asked me was 'Are you planning to marry this woman?'" I told him I wasn't sure, but since then I've thought a lot about that question. What do you suppose he meant? Can Catholic couples sleep together if they're thinking about marriage?

On another occasion, having grown loose with wine, a Protestant named Amanda told me, "I have this thing for bad boys, dependent guys, you know." Troubled by her promiscuity, and encouraged by a coworker, she attended a retreat at a convent. There she sought out a nun for counseling, one of those bulldog women who gave up a perfectly good habit to dress like a butch lesbian.

After Amanda had delineated her penchant for sex and men, the nun regarded her gravely. "Do you give these men pleasure?" she asked.

"I'm pretty sure I do," Amanda said.



(I'm pretty sure she does too, Your Excellency.)

The nun asked, "Do you give them love?" Amanda nodded. "Do you give of yourself?" Amanda nodded again. The nun smiled and said, "Love is the key. You bring love to lonely souls. As long as your ideal is pleasure and comfort for them, there is no sin."

After telling me this story, Amanda added, "I'm ashamed to say I always thought Catholics were against f--king."

In yet another incident, Sam, a lukewarm Methodist, confided to me at a New Year's Day party that his Catholic girlfriend had laid down some ground rules between them. The essence of these regulations dictated that they might lie together naked as babes, caress each other, and even practice oral sex, but that intercourse was verboten until they became engaged. Sam then asked me if this convention was common practice among Catholics.

Your Excellency, I am confused. Is there some secret Catholic code of which I, a convert, am unaware? Did I miss something in the Catechism? Are some sexual acts permitted if marriage is in the offing? Was Philip's priest implying a sort of lockstep between sex and love on the march to matrimony? Are there hidden rules resembling the old baseball analogy? (Casually dating players may advance to first base; serious players may head for second; courting runners may round third; engaged couples go all the way.)

Please answer these questions as quickly as possible. My friends depend on your wisdom and expediency.

Joe Ecclesia

by Scott P. Richert

Don't Stop Thinkin' About Tomorrow

At the 1992 Democratic National Convention, Bill Clinton adopted Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop (Thinkin' About Tomorrow)" as his unofficial theme song. Its bouncy, optimistic strains would be reflected in Clinton's line, four years later, that "We do not need to build a bridge to the past, we need to build a bridge to the future."

We know now that President Clinton's "bridge to the future" turned out to be more like Sarah Palin's "bridge to nowhere." From the approval of NAFTA in the first year of his administration to the repeal of the Glass-Steagall restrictions on banks in the final year, President Clinton set the stage for the destruction of American manufacturing and for the financial crisis that has effectively ended a century of American economic dominance.

Clinton had a little help from his friends, including Ronald Reagan, who first appointed Alan Greenspan as chairman of the Federal Reserve, replacing the strict monetarist Paul Volcker. Volcker had administered the necessary medicine to bring to an end the "stagflation" of the 1970's, but he was at best an agnostic when it came to deregulation, and the free-market ideologues in the Reagan administration saw deregulation as a key to future economic growth.

Measured purely in terms of Gross Domestic Product, they were right; but deregulation, outsourcing, offshoring, and the blurring of lines between traditional banks and investment houses forever changed the shape of the American economy. While GDP grew by leaps and bounds over the past 20 years, household income remained stagnant. A rising tide lifts all boats, but sometimes it smashes some of them on the rocks.

Within days of the Obama administration declaring in October that the recession had come to an end, the national unemployment rate rose to 10.2 percent, its highest level since April

1983. Here in Illinois, it jumped by 0.5 percent to 11 percent, its highest point since August 1983.

At the time of this writing, October numbers have yet to be released for areas within Illinois, but the Rockford Metropolitan Statistical Area hit 15.2 percent in September; Winnebago County, 15.5; and Rockford, 17.2. It is not surprising that Rockford is outpacing the rest of the state and the nation. Demographics play an important role, but even more significant is the breakdown of job losses.

The United States has lost 2.1 million jobs in manufacturing since December 2007, 95,200 here in Illinois. Despite shedding as much as 25 percent of manufacturing jobs since 2001, Rockford remains a manufacturing town: 20 percent of all employment is in manufacturing, and another 20 percent is dependent on it. And even those manufacturers who have survived have found themselves squeezed by the credit crunch.

All is not doom and gloom, but the bright spots in the local economy do not augur well for the future. One manufacturer whose stock in trade is primarily after-market auto parts tells me that business is booming, but he is quick to note that he always does well when people cannot afford to purchase new automobiles.

If the economy continues to shed jobs at all levels, how can the recession have ended? As the old saying goes, *Figures don't lie, but liars figure*, and economists determine the end of a recession by positive growth in GDP. Government "stimulation" of the economy has halted the decline, but if such programs as "Cash for Clunkers" have not slowed the demand for after-market auto parts, the momentary rise in GDP is likely masking continued weakness in the economy.

Because the Bush and Obama bailouts have kept mortgage rates artificially low, housing starts have re-



bounded, up over ten percent. Illinois added 1,000 construction jobs in October, but that barely touches the 47,400 jobs lost in construction here since December 2007, much less the 1.7 million nationally. Next to manufacturing, construction has led national job loss in this recession.

It's no surprise that a nation that makes less and less—both manufactured products and personal income—is building less and less, too. Economists and politicians have become so focused on the big picture—the size of the economy—that they have forgotten a lesson that I learned long ago in the nature center at P.J. Hoffmaster State Park outside Muskegon, Michigan: Over time, a forest may grow and contract, but the most important changes take place as the composition of the forest changes. Once the white pines have been replaced by birches, the majestic pine forest is never coming back.

My neighbor and I may sell services to each other all year long, and the Gross Domestic Product will grow each time we hand the same money back and forth. But the wealth of the nation, not to mention our personal wealth, will never budge. True economic growth comes from the production of tangible goods, whether through manufacturing, construction, agriculture, or mining.

For several decades now, all of our political leaders have thought that they were thinking about tomorrow, when they were really only living for the moment. And now yesterday is truly gone, and tomorrow won't be better than before. 