

Dec. 6, 2015

The story of Brother Horace Silt

I was waiting for my car to get its bimonthly oil change when I happened upon an article in a grease-stained copy of "Garage and Gardens" magazine.

Nearly hidden next to an article by Dale Earnhardt Jr. detailing how old oil cans can make terrific gardenia planters, was a small blurb noting the 140th birthday of Brother Horace Silt, inventor of the very first novelty item, a tin of Mustard Plaster that, when opened, released a spring-coiled snake. The article said very little about the man, so I decided to take a deeper look into the life of this Catholic inventor.

Horace was born in Lesser Hungaria-Kummerspeck (later renamed Huntsville) on Aug. 3, 1875. His mother was a sheep shearer known in her village for being the first to utilize among sheep the look that still is used today on the most couture of French poodles. Horace's father, Oskar Silt, was owner of the "Happy Oxen" pub and French friary. Both parents were deeply devout, attending Mass each day, and teaching their seven children to hold sacred the teachings of Jesus.

Among little Horace's favorite readings was from Psalms 2:4: "...and He in Heaven laughed."

"I am dedicated to the notion that it was not the only time God laughed," Brother Horace wrote in his autobiography. "I maintain that with God's creation of the human race, our heavenly Father found not only His beloved children, but an endless supply of hilarious jokes."

Horace's love for "the Lord and laughter" led to his first invention, the everlit candle. With his youthful hopes for laughter a bit misplaced, he replaced the altar candles with his new invention, not realizing that the inability of the parish priest—one Father Francis Gauthier—to douse the flame, would lead to the visitation of a Vatican emissary who would officially rule on the phenomenon, declaring it a miracle. (CPD 1886; ps. 212-215)

Throughout the ensuing years, thousands would be drawn to the site. Young Horace realized then that there was a difference between spreading joyful laughter among God's people, and doing something really, really stupid. He would dedicate himself to the former, while not entirely avoiding the latter.

In 1890, at the tender age of 15, he entered the monastery.

"There, I betook a journey that would lead me to open fully the door to Christ, allowing Him into my heart and mind where I might live in Him and He in me, and together we might share many chuckles, if not outright belly-laughs."

While at seminary he earned notoriety by impersonating the school-master, Msgr. Evardy (with Msgr. Evardy's permission), even perfecting the monsignor's trademark nose-whistle (with which the monsignor accompanied the choir at Sunday Mass.

In the early 1920s, Msgr. Evardy gained popularity with his nose-whistle recording of "The Bells of St. Mary's" on an Edison Cylinder).

In 1898, Brother Horace invented the joke Mustard Plaster, earning him instant notoriety. Sales of the novelty item brought the monastery great wealth. The Brothers purchased mattresses for their cells, so that they no longer had to sleep on left-over broccoli, as well as new sets of books for their library: "The Lives of the Saints," "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare," and "Great Jokes to Tell at Parties."

But that wasn't enough for Brother Horace. For the first time, he questioned his vocation, in particular, the vow of poverty: "Thus did I become convinced that God had intended, in His infinite wisdom, for me to have stuff," he wrote. "Why else would my Heavenly Father create so much stuff that I really, really wanted?"

Since Brother Horace himself was poor, he decided that rather than donating his earnings to the poor of the village, he would instead buy and donate items to himself, which he gratefully accepted. But, with his newly purchased alligator skin sandals, sheep's wool-lined robe, and lifetime supply of "Dr. William's Pink Pills for Pale People," came the unwelcome introduction of disillusionment. The joy he thought he was purchasing acted only to steal the true joy he had felt prior to acquiring wealth. And with his joy, so went his sense of humor.

It was, as he wrote, "a real bummer." One night, Brother Horace put on his old, moth-ridden robe and his barely-held-together sandals. He poured his "Pink Pills for Pale People" down the outhouse, sat down at a table and opened his Bible at random.

"Go, sell your things and give your money to the poor..." he read aloud. "It dawned on me then that perhaps God was trying to tell me something. I again opened the Bible at random to yet another passage. It read, 'Gee. You think?'

"And with that came the joyful realization that where there is humor, one need not look far to find God. I presented my new robe to Brother Felix, whose robe was so old that it only covered his left wrist, and returned my sandals for a full refund.

"And that night, alone in my cell, the Lord and I had a good chuckle about the whole thing."