

Jan. 15, 2017

Plop, plop; fiz, fiz; pray, pray

So, I'm lying in a roll-away bed at my folks' tiny assisted living apartment, stuffed between their coffee table and TV. It's Christmas night in Denver. I had awoken the previous morning--Christmas morning--with a cold. According to the rules, I couldn't be exposed to the elderly residents. Therefore, I wasn't able to go to Mass on Christmas.

Despite being happy to be with my folks for another Christmas, a bumper-load of events served up over the prior three days caused me to begin to feel a little like Job. *But this is Christmas*, I told myself. *Christmas is the least of all times when I should be getting a heavenly persecution complex!*

The irrational chorus of debate between appreciation and bitterness still wafted in my head that Christmas night, when I finally decided that despite my problems--most of which were outside of my control, anyway--I would focus on my appreciation for spending Christmas with my parents. *And I was warm*, I reminded myself as I lay in bed; I was secure. I had food and water. I didn't have to fear bullets or bombs. There are always reasons to be grateful.

That's when I began to get the *ch-ch-chills*. *This is more than just a cold*, I told myself, to which myself replied, *What was your first clue, Sherlock?* I pulled up my blankets and tucked them around my neck. The top blanket—a thick quilt—was a throw, which meant that pulling it up to my neck would uncover my feet. When I tried to pull it back down over my feet, it came off of my neck. It had the effect of making me feel really tall.

Finally, I warmed up. *Ahhhhhh*. And then I *really* warmed up. Soon I realized that I was melting. *Oh, what a world! What a world*, I whispered as I wrung the perspiration out of my sheets. I would later learn that I had lost 13 pounds in six minutes.

I pulled the blanket off and felt the relief of cool air. And then I began to get chilled again. I was shaking so hard that my roll-away bed began to move across the room like an overfilled washer. It bounced into the coffee table and the refrigerator. It bounced its way out the door and into the hall, making its way through the automatic doors and into the parking lot. It bounced along Federal Blvd. and crossed the I-70 viaduct. Eventually it rolled into a Wendy's where it lodged itself between a table and the automatic soda dispenser.

Finally, someone named "Jeff", who, in my fevered state looked like an apple salad, wheeled me back to the building.

I carefully rewrapped myself in my blankets, leaving no flesh uncovered except for one nostril. My nostril shivered, but the rest of me was okay. I began to warm up again. It was at about that time that, after much careful consideration, I determined that I quite badly needed to use the bathroom. I debated the uncomfortable effects of a very full bladder versus the soul-piercing pummeling of a major case of the chills. The bathroom was about 10 feet away, but it might as well have been 10 miles. I'll say no more about that.

By morning, I felt the first hint of what could be stomach flu. Stomach flu is the *worst!* I can think of no physical pain that compares to that feeling you get just before you urp. I imagine that giving birth is a close second.

"Please Lord, please!" I prayed. "Not stomach flu! Mother Mary, please tell God to keep me from having stomach flu! He *listens* to you!"

One glass of Alka Seltzer later, and I realized I didn't have stomach flu. *Thank you, Lord*. Everything on this earth is a gift, even Alka Seltzer. In fact, Alka Seltzer is one of the better ones. Have you tried it? Get yours today! (*Note to self: Send column to Alka Seltzer people. Free samples pending.*)

But then ... then the stomach pain returned! "Man! Come on, Lord! Please!"

And just as quickly eased: "Oh, good. Thank you. You're the best. Thanks, Lord."

Then it came back. For 10 minutes, I went back and forth between angry tirades and heart-felt “thank yous”. Sometimes I treat God like the manager at a restaurant, when God is really the health inspector. (I’m not sure exactly what that means, but it sounds right.)

One day of rest later and I was on my way back to Kansas, a serious sinus infection having lodged in my head for what would be a nearly two-week stay.

It was while on my way to Tulsa a few days later for New Year’s with the in-laws when I had a thought (yes, I get them sometimes). When we find ourselves burdened with self-concerns, whether it’s health problems, financial woes, addictions, or emotional issues, it’s good therapy to level attention on others, to those in need.

But it’s the same when we are focusing too much attention on outer things--things we can’t necessarily control. Sometimes we need to slow down, to focus a little attention on ourselves--even if it’s initiated by a miserable sinus infection. This just might just be God’s way of helping us refocus.

Still, I had missed Christmas Mass due to my cold. And as happens every year, my wife and I had gone our separate ways at Christmas to be with our families in other states.

There I go again, fighting a battle between appreciation and bitterness.

So, yesterday--Jan. 7--we were driving back from Great Bend when we stopped at Sacred Heart Church in Larned for Mass.

The worship area was still decorated with garland; a nativity scene and tall Christmas tree graced the front of the church. Wreaths and bright bulbs lit up the windows, and Christmas carols were sung by the congregation.

Father Warren Stecklein, pastor, spoke of the importance of not limiting Christmas to a day or even a season, that as we put away our decorations, the miracle of Christmas should stay in our hearts year-round.

When we left, we felt as if we had celebrated our first Christmas Mass together in more than a decade. Just when you think that life’s more bitter than sweet, God will provide you with a little church in the country, it’s bright lights burning, its voices raised in song. Keep your eyes open. You don’t want to miss it.