

THE EPISTLE

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This Month's Cover

In observance of the Feast of the Epiphany (Jan. 6), our cover this month is “The Adoration of the Magi,” attributed to Fra Angelico. It is a tondo (circular painting), 4'6" in diameter, done with tempera on a wood panel. Experts estimate it to have been painted sometime between 1440 and 1460. They also believe that parts of it may have been completed by Fra Lippo and other artists during that 20-year period. It was originally commissioned by the Medici family for their palace chapel in Florence, and it is now displayed in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. It depicts a Magus kissing the foot of the infant Jesus, who is seated on his mother’s lap, surrounded by great crowds of adorers. Joseph stands beside Mary, and the three characters in ragged clothes represent the shepherds who visited Jesus on the night of his birth. Even though the visit of the Magi actually was several weeks or even months after the birth of Jesus, and liturgically their visit is not observed until 12 days after Christmas. The combination of these events is very common in paintings, particularly Renaissance paintings. Likewise, even though the Bible says that the Magi visited him in a house, paintings traditionally represent the whole event in the context of a stable.

Fra Angelico (“Angelic Friar”) was born Guido di Pietro in 1395, in a small village near Florence. Nothing is known of his family or childhood other than that he was baptized Guido in the local church. The first record we have is when he joined a religious Order in 1417. We know that he was already a painter because of two payments to a Guido di Pietro for paintings done a couple of years earlier. In 1423, he joined the Dominican order, taking the name Fra Giovanni (Friar John), because it was customary to change one’s name upon joining such an order. His first training in the order was as an illustrator, possibly being trained by his older brother Benedetto, who was a Dominican illustrator. He began to build a reputation as a painter, particularly for his paintings and frescoes, most of which have unfortunately been lost. In 1436, he was moved to the

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Friary of San Marco in Florence, where he gained the notice of Cosimo de' Medici, who was a strong patron of the arts. It was there that he painted the Adoration of the Magi. In 1445, Pope Eugene IV summoned him to Rome to paint the frescoes in the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in Saint Peter's Basilica. Unfortunately, Pope Paul III demolished that chapel in 1536 as part of his renovation of Saint Peter's. In 1447-49, he was primarily engaged in designing the frescoes for the Nicoline Chapel being built by Pope Nicholas V. In 1449, he returned to his first monastery in Fiesole to become prior of the Dominican abbey there. By that time, he was commonly known as Fra Angelico, the Angelic Friar. In 1455 he was visiting Rome, possibly with regard to the Nicoline frescoes, and it was there that he died. In 1982, Pope John Paul II beatified him.

Richard R. Losch+

A Word from the Editor

Although the secular celebration of the Christmas festival is over and all but forgotten, the season is still with us. Indeed, if we are truly practicing Christians, the Christmas Spirit should be with us all year round. I am not referring just to the lightheartedness and merrymaking of Christmas, but to the spirit of consideration, kindness, generosity, love, and most important of all, of the joy that is usually associated with this season. Even though they are closely related, joy and happiness are not the same thing. Happiness can come and go as circumstances change, and it can be destroyed by a long period of extreme difficulty. Joy, on the other hand, is a lasting and deep-seated sense of security and well-being, even in the midst of trouble. It comes with the confidence that ultimately, no matter what we may have to go through on the way, we will find true peace and stability. What St. Paul described as "the peace of God which passes all understanding" is one aspect of joy. It was this joy, this sense of purpose and well-being, that enabled the early Christian martyrs to die horribly in the arena, yet die with smiles on their faces. This frightened Nero, because he could not understand it at all. Having this joy requires a lot of faith, and that requires a lot of work, because it is not natural to humans. Doing what we can to maintain the Christmas spirit throughout the year helps to nourish that faith. "Joy to the world, the Lord has come!"

Richard R. Losch+

The One Unforgivable Sin

The third commandment says: “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” This is often misinterpreted as a mandate against cursing, but that is not its meaning. Expressions such as “God, what a hard day” or even “God damn it” are vulgar and disrespectful, and they are sinful in that they take God lightly, but this is not the same as misusing his Name. In fact, “God” is not his name; it is the designation of who and what he is. His Name is the Hebrew JHVH or YHWH (יהוָה), which is commonly rendered as Yahweh.¹ Taking that Sacred Name in vain means calling upon him seriously and intentionally to bless or do something which any reasonable person should know is abhorrent to him. For example, slaughtering people in the name of God because they do not believe in him is a clear violation of this commandment. Christians have been guilty of that in the past, but have now come to a greater understanding of how wrong it is. There are many fanatics today, however, such as the Westboro Baptist Church, who still commit this sin. Crying “Allahu akhbar” (“Our God is great”) as you fly a plane into a building to murder thousands of people is a clear violation of this commandment. The second part of the commandment, that God will not hold him guiltless who misuses his Name, is often interpreted to mean that this sin is unforgivable. That is not what it says. It says that God will take this as a serious sin, and will not just pass it off. It does not say that he will not forgive those who truly repent of it.²

¹ For reasons we will not go into here, no one is sure how the sacred name was originally pronounced. Most scholars accept the pronunciation Yahweh. In an attempt to decipher what JHVH meant, early scribes inserted the vowels from the Hebrew word *Adonai*, Lord, producing the name Jehovah. Even though it is often used today, this name is man-made and is an incorrect attempt to render JHVH.

² There are many passages in Leviticus that require the death penalty for certain crimes. In most of these, there is no historical evidence that it was ever carried out, even though there are many records of dealing with such crimes. Most scholars agree that in most cases, the death penalty was not intended to be carried out. It was prescribed to emphasize that God takes this crime very seriously. In ancient Hebrew literature, overstatement or exaggeration was a very common tool to emphasize something.

When Jesus exorcised evil spirits, his adversaries said that he cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub.¹ He replied that if he cast out demons by the power of a demon, by what power did they cast them out? He then went on to say that by saying this they had blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, and that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was the one sin that would never be forgiven (Matt. 12:32). His hearers clearly understood this as a reference to what we call the Third Commandment. To understand this story, however, it is important that we understand what the term “Holy Spirit” meant to the Jews of Jesus’ time. The Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity would not be formalized and understood until many decades later. Although the doctrine of the Trinity is pointed to in many places in the Old Testament and is developed from Old Testament teachings, it was unknown in Jesus’ time.² It was not revealed until the Deposit of Faith on Pentecost, after his death and resurrection.

Disrespecting God, ignoring him, joking about him, or even misusing his Holy Name is not necessarily blasphemy. Such things may be tasteless, crude, and sinful, but they are not automatically blasphemous. Blasphemy is a conscious and intentional direct assault on God’s holiness and divine authority. The Torah treats it extremely severely, calling for the death penalty for blasphemers (Lev. 24:16).

This raises the question of why blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable, but apparently not blasphemy against the Father or the Son. The answer is that, as we mentioned above, the phrase “Holy Spirit” did not mean the same thing to the Jews of Jesus’ time as it means to Christians today. To those to whom the Holy Trinity had not yet been revealed, the Holy Spirit meant the Spirit of Holiness, God Himself. In the creation story in Genesis, we read that the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. This

¹ Beelzebub, “Lord of the Flies,” was a chief deity among the Canaanites. The Jews frequently referred to him pejoratively as Beelzebul, “Lord of Dung.” Many Bible translations use “Beelzebul” in this story.

² During his 33 years on earth in human flesh, Christ “poured out” his divine knowledge and relied only on the knowledge available to any human (Phil. 2:5-8). Therefore, even though in his divinity he would have understood all, in his humanity as Jesus of Nazareth he limited himself to human knowledge. Therefore, when he referred to the Holy Spirit, he meant the same thing that it would have meant to any well-informed Jew.

meant that the chaos of the first stage of creation was tamed by being pervaded with the holiness of God. To the Jews, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit meant blasphemy against everything that God is. It means the same thing to Christians: Blasphemy against any Person of the Holy Trinity is blasphemy against all three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—everything that God is.

The question then comes up: Why was Jesus so hard on the Pharisees just for saying that he cast out demons by the power of the devil? They were the most powerful religious leaders in Israel. They were the teachers, and the people listened to them. They had amazing influence over the faith, thoughts, and actions of the Jewish people. The Sadducee were priests who offered the sacrifices in the temple, but the Pharisees were the teachers and religious leaders. They were, for the most part, very rich, and were unquestionably the intellectual elite of that society. This gave them great responsibility. Many of them had abused that power, and that is why Jesus was so hard on them. There is little doubt that when they accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan, they didn't really believe that. Jesus was a threat to their power and wealth, and they were willing to say and do anything to get rid of him. The Bible even tells us that they were trying to find an excuse to kill him. When they accused him of casting out demons by the power of Satan, they clearly didn't really believe it, but said it to demean him in the eyes of his followers to protect their own power and wealth. If that lie caused people to fail to seek salvation, then the loss of their souls was the responsibility of the liars. That is a serious responsibility.

From the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, the Bible constantly tells us that God is a God of mercy and forgiveness, and that He will forgive the sins of anyone who repents. Why then do we suddenly find this one sin which we are told will not be forgiven? I believe that even this will be forgiven if we truly repent of it and ask God's forgiveness. The reason it is unforgivable is very likely that anyone who is so spiritually degraded that he would consciously and knowingly blaspheme God is very unlikely ever to repent and seek forgiveness. The Bible is also clear throughout that forgiveness is not automatic, but comes only with repentance and asking for mercy. Intentional blasphemers are not likely to do so, and therefore are unlikely ever to repent and ask for forgiveness.

Richard R. Losch+

Our Changing Language

Many people, including your editor, are rather old-fashioned and stodgy when it comes to the apparent rapid decline of the English language. We strongly disapprove of split infinitives and of ending sentences with prepositions,¹ we despise using nouns as if they were verbs, and using the wrong case of a pronoun (as in “She gave it to he and I”) is to us like a fingernail on a chalkboard. Notwithstanding, it is good that there are stodgy people like us around, because we tend to slow down that change in a language that is in fact necessary to keep it from becoming dead language. A dead language is one that never changes and very quickly ceases to be used by the common people for their daily communication. Latin is a language that was once used by hundreds of millions of people around the world for their day-to-day speech. It is now a dead language, used only by scholars, theologians, historians and scientists in their professions, but not to buy groceries or discuss the weather with a friend.

Change is what keeps a language alive, and linguists have studied for years the manifold causes of these changes. Even those who hate change tacitly accept thousands of changes in our language that were once considered vulgar and abominable. For example, Jonathan Swift, the author of “Gulliver’s Travels,” decried the slovenly pronunciation of the past tense/participle verbs. People were often

¹ These rules actually came from the writings of the 18th century English bishop and linguist Robert Lowth. English was just coming to be recognized as an important European language, and he wrote a book codifying the rules of English grammar. Until that time, there were almost no standard rules of either grammar or spelling. The accepted languages of cultured people in those days were Latin and Greek, so Lowth based his rules on the grammatical rules of Latin and Greek. In those languages, it is extremely awkward to place a preposition at the end of a sentence. It must always be placed immediately before the relative. Even Lowth recognized that in many cases it is more awkward to obey the rule, and he said that it should be stretchly observed only in cultured and scholarly writings. He accepted it for speech and informal writings, although in later years, many purists became very strict about the rule, even in speech. In Latin, the infinitive is one word, not two as it is in English (*amare*, “to love”). This is why Lowth forbade splitting it. Splitting a word, as in “abso-damn-lutely,” is considered vulgar and ignorant. Splitting an English infinitive (as in “to boldly go”) should have no such restriction. Notwithstanding, two centuries of honoring the rule has given it authority even today.

eliding the last syllable and failing to pronounce the *e* in such words as “showed,” “loved,” and “opened,” pronouncing them as if they were “showd,” “lovd,” “and opend.” They were even going so far as to pronounce “blessed” as if it were “blest!” (today the latter is a perfectly acceptable past tense of “bless.”) We not only have come to accept these as standard, but we would be a bit amused if somebody open-ed box and show-ed us what was inside.

Another example of a change that is happening today that many of us dislike is the use of the third person plural pronoun when the gender of the subject is unknown: “If someone wants to leave, they should raise their hand.” Some try to avoid this by saying, “He or she,” but this is awkward and unattractive. The old rule is that when the gender is undetermined, the masculine form should be used. Feminism has done away with that rule.¹ Using the plural may seem wrong, but then we must remember, that it was not all that long ago that it was considered incorrect to use “you” when “thou” and “thee” would be the proper forms. The singular forms were “thou goest,” and “I gave it to thee.” The plural form was “you go,” and “I gave it to you.”² Over time, “thee” and “thou” were replaced with the plural “you,” and today that is considered the correct form. If someone said “thou goest,” we would think it quaint.

Another change that many do not like is “verbing,” the use of a noun as verb. Fifty years ago, “text” was strictly a noun. A text was the printed form of something. A textbook was a book that contained the printed form of something. Today, “I texted you yesterday” is considered quite acceptable. Also, the creation of false words from previously existing words is becoming increasingly common. “Surveillance” is a French word that means “watching.” In the past few years a new verb, “to surveil,” has been extracted from that. This is a manufactured word with no true linguistic root. On the other hand, this is not new. Centuries years ago, the verb “to beg” was falsely extracted from the word “beggar.” The word “beggar” had been around for centuries before the word “beg” ever existed.

¹ The use of the word “gender” is another issue in today’s language. There are two sexes: male and female, and these are biological. There are three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter, and these are linguistic. Sex and gender are not the same thing, and are not synonymous. Even so, today “gender” is used often when the word “sex” is more appropriate.

² Even two centuries ago, the first person plural “ye” was disappearing.

What this all comes down to is that change in a living language is inevitable. Some changes are weak and illogical, while others are practical and make sense. Such changes are important to the growth and enrichment of a language. Resistance to them is equally important to keep these changes from running rampant and allowing the language to degenerate into weak or meaningless expressions.

Richard R. Losch+

A Touch of Trivia

One of the staple songs of the Christmas season is “Jingle Bells.” It was originally written not as a Christmas song, however, but rather as a Thanksgiving song. Nowhere in it is Christmas mentioned. James Lord Pierpont wrote it in 1857 as part of a children’s Thanksgiving pageant. Pierpont was a church organist, musician, and songwriter. He was born in Boston, the son of a preacher. His brother John was an abolitionist preacher who moved to Georgia. James followed him there and became the organist in his brother’s church. John’s abolitionist sympathies caused him to be driven out of the church. He moved back north, but James remained in Georgia and eventually became a Confederate soldier. He called the song “The One Horse Open Sleigh.” Two years later, in 1859, it was published under the title “Jingle Bells.” It wasn’t until several decades later that it ended up becoming associated with Christmas.

Richard R. Losch+

Be Wordly Wise

Count Nouns and Mass Nouns

When I was in college, I had a German exchange student friend who sometimes struggled with English. One time I asked him where he had been, and he said, “I went to get my hairs cut.” I told him that it was “haircut,” and he said, “But I got them all cut.” I spoke a bit of German, so I knew that in Germany (as in most countries) you don’t comb your hair. You comb your hairs. Also, why do we say, “I don’t like beans, but I like corn?” To be consistent, shouldn’t it be “I don’t like bean” or “I like corns?” In most languages, there are nouns for things that can be counted individually, called count nouns, and nouns for things that are measured not in numbers but in amounts, called mass noun. We talk about a quart of milk (mass

noun) and a dozen eggs (count noun). Usually, these are obvious as to which is which, but sometimes there is no logic to it. For example, what is the difference between a can of beans and a can of corn? One is used as a count noun, and the other as a mass noun, and there is no logic to it—one contains a number of bean seeds, and the other contains a number of corn seeds. Language is often illogical. One of the accepted rules of grammar is the distinction between “fewer” and “less.” We use fewer with count nouns and less with mass nouns—put *fewer* beans and *less* water in the soup. The grocery store express line is for ten items or *fewer*, but we would like to see *less* mess on the counter. As we grow up and learn a language as children, we learn these distinctions without even thinking about them. For a non-English speaker learning the language, it is much more difficult. He might prefer to spend fewer monies to get his hairs cut.

Richard R. Losch+

How to Read the Bible.

Most people, when they intend to read the whole Bible, start with Genesis and plan to read all the way through Revelation. This is probably the worst way to read it. It is almost guaranteed that you will get through Genesis and Exodus with little trouble, following the story line and basically understanding what you are reading. Then you hit Leviticus, and for many people, that is a dead end. They have all good intentions of continuing, but after pages of ritual rules about what Temple priests should wear and how to conduct sacrifices, readers set their Bibles aside, and that is often the end of it. There is much of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, that is of great importance to theologians, historians, and scholars, but is of little spiritual value to the average Christian or Jew. The second problem is one of chronology. The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, is reasonably chronological in that it starts with Genesis at the very beginning of things and goes on through the Exodus from Egypt and the arrival in the Promised Land. After that, the chronology breaks down. The order of the writings of the Prophets is not chronological, and the Gospels were written long after the letters of Saint Paul. We do not catch up with proper chronology again until Revelation, which was probably the last book of the Bible to be written. Scholars believe that Job was written before the oral tradition of the Pentateuch was put into writing.

How then should we read the Bible? My recommendation is to use a lectionary. A lectionary is a schedule of daily Bible readings, usually consisting of readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, the Epistles, and one of the four Gospels. The most popular lectionary, used by most Christian denominations, including the Roman Catholic, is the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). This is set up as a three-year cycle for Sundays (A, B, and C), and a two-year cycle for weekdays (1 and 2). Each begins annually on the first Sunday of Advent. Following these readings every day, which will usually take fewer than ten minutes per day, in a period of two years you will have read everything in the Bible that is of importance. All you will have skipped are the portions that we mentioned above, such as ancient ritual laws and regulations that are of interest only to scholars. Most of the daily readings are related to each other, and over the course of the two years you will have followed a subject pattern that makes sense. There are many sources for the RCL that you can find by doing an online search, or you can purchase calendars or copies of it in most bookstores. A very convenient way to get the RCL is provided free by the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It is a daily email with the readings printed out, along with an option to hear them read aloud as you follow along. Subscribe at <https://www.usccb.org/subscribe/daily-readings-email-subscription-form>. You can also find the traditional lectionary on which the RCL is based in the Book of Common Prayer on pages 888ff.

We encourage you to give this a try. Daily Bible reading not only will familiarize you much more with the teachings of the Church, but you will also find a strengthening of your spiritual life and much solace in those teachings. Reading the Bible in an organized way, rather than simply from beginning to end, will make that a even more enriching experience.

Richard R. Losch+

The Eight Days of Hanukkah

The Jewish celebration of Hanukkah took place last month, but even though it is now past, I believe it merits some comment here. More than once I have heard it referred to as the “Jewish Christmas,” and nothing could be more inaccurate. It has nothing to do with Christmas other than that both feasts happen to fall in December every year. One of the names of the festival is “the Feast of Dedi-

cation.” We read in John 10:22-23 that Jesus was in the temple in Jerusalem on that feast, presumably to celebrate it.

In the early 2nd century BC the Seleucid Empire gained control of Judea. The Seleucids were based in Syria, and were descendants of the conquest of Alexander the Great. In 175 BC, Antiochus IV Epiphanes became the Seleucid emperor. He was mad, and tried to force the Greek culture, language and religion on everyone in his empire. He declared it illegal for Jews to practice their faith, and set up pagan altars all over Judea. He commanded that every Jew eat pork and offer a sacrifice to Zeus, under penalty of death. He sacrificed pigs to Zeus on the high altar of the Temple in Jerusalem. In the town of Modein near Jerusalem, the priest Mattathias bar-Hashmon, a leader of the local people, was forced to go to the town center and there was ordered to eat pork and offer a sacrifice to Zeus. He not only refused to do so, but when he saw a Jew eating pork and preparing to offer a sacrifice, he killed him and the king’s officer who had given the order. He and his sons, along with many faithful Jews from the town, fled into the hills and launched a rebellion against the Seleucids. When he died his son Judas, called Maccabeus (the Hammer), took leadership of the rebellion. The Maccabean rebels were eventually successful, driving the Seleucids out of Judea.¹ They ritually cleansed the Temple and dedicated it, re-lighting the *Ner Tamid*, the Eternal Light that represents God’s presence. Tradition says that there was only one day’s worth of oil, but that the light burned miraculously for eight days until new oil could be prepared and consecrated. However, this is not in the Bible, what was a later Rabbinic tradition. In fact, eight days has always had great significance to both Jews and Christians. God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. The eighth day was when all of creation went into what we might call “full operation.” The eighth day has thus always been a symbol of rebirth or new beginnings.² The eight-day Feast of Hanukkah celebrates Judea’s freedom as represented by the eight days of the Dedication of the Temple.

Richard R. Losch +

¹ For about a century, Judea was free, ruled by what are popularly called the Maccabees. The official name of the dynasty was the Hasmonean Dynasty after Hashmon, the patriarch of Matathias’s family.

² This is why early Christian baptismal fonts were traditionally eight-sided.