



# Boston Catholic Journal



NIHIL NISI IESUM

Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

Salus Animarum Suprema Lex Esto (Canon Law 175)

The Salvation of Souls is the Supreme Law in the Church

## Poor Math

$$3+3+3=11$$

### ... and Poorer Prayer

“Thus, the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Christ, fourteen generations.” (St. Matthew 1.17)

**Saint Matthew had been a tax collector. He was intimately familiar with debits, credits, and balances,** and was, in a sense, closer to the *Mathematekoi* of Pythagoras – who understood the world and reality at large in terms of *numbers*, not as analogous to reality but as constitutive of it — than he was to, say, the minutiae of Mosaic Law which also, to a lesser extent, was iterated in terms of numbers.

In the end, for Matthew the Tax Collector, the balancing of numbers at the end of the account — however achieved — was paramount. The last number, the final figure, was the sum of his work. What may have “exceeded” the *legitimate* sum ... belonged to Matthew, to the tax collector, and that is one of the reasons they were hated. Today we call it Corporate skimming ...

We see this in today’s Gospel – a reading, admittedly, that does not readily lend itself to profound contemplation, ... if we are frank, these 54 lines are arguably the driest in all the Gospels, and they occur, predictably, only in Matthew's account; Matthew, a man whose life was immersed in numbers – before Christ called him from the counting table.

Given Saint Matthew's facility with logical things that culminated in correct conclusions, the purpose to this otherwise tedious preface to his Gospel is to legitimize the Christ as the Son of David, an attempt at a kind of Rabbinical “proof” necessary to establishing the legitimacy of Jesus as the Christ. The genealogy numerically affirmed what Mary already knew without counting.

So many of us are more like Matthew than Mary; at least before Jesus summoned

Matthew from the counting table to the threshing floor. We count. Ceaselessly. We attempt to *justify* ourselves before God in terms of numbers — whether as Corporal and Spiritual Acts of Mercy, or the beads on our Rosaries — as though a preponderance of numbers will leverage our relationship with God in a way that will somehow augment or supplement the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. We *count* on our entering the Kingdom of God, so to speak.

We boast of the *numbers* of our prayers, how *many* Rosaries we have prayed, how many “Our Fathers” we have said, how many “Hail Marys”, and “Glory Be’s” we have recited; how many Masses we have attended – unlike that Publican over there who has said much less, and gone less often.

Literally we say, as in the Shakespearian Sonnet, “How do I love Thee, O, my God? *Let me count the ways* — for I have the numbers nailed down.” And yet Jesus Himself admonishes us against this: “*In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*” (Saint Matthew 6.7-8). We are urged to pray incessantly, but not mindlessly, not for the sake of achieving a “numerical superiority” as though we can overwhelm, overcome, God by our incessant utterances said largely in rote — and achieve a higher “score” than our Publican neighbor.

Think of the many Rosary groups you have attended, or heard, where the prayers — each and every one of them — are not so much *prayed* as *recited*. The monotony is often stultifying — and unmistakable in the voices. Often it is accompanied by a cadence ... a meter of sorts that is mechanical more than

musical. *This is not in any way to disparage the Holy Rosary — a most salutary and beautiful gift from Mary Most Holy.*

Rather, think of it like this: if another *dared* speak this way *to us*, we would certainly part ways quickly, realizing that this man, this woman, is mumbling something of which we happen to be the opportune and unfortunate occasion. I do not understand her as *speaking* to me! She is *reciting* something to me that appears to have little to do with me, and which really is not being said, in any meaningful way, *to me*. Her words are many – but they do not qualify as *talking to me*. She will nevertheless leave satisfied that she has communicated well with me simply because she has said much.

## **We are often like that with God**

We are more concerned with *numbers* – especially the fulfilling of certain numbers – *than with speaking to God from our hearts as we would speak to a real Person.*

Any prayer uttered quickly and by rote, for the sake of its simply having been said, fulfilled, is at least implicitly disingenuous. It is not entirely unlike our asking one another upon meeting, “*How are you?*”. We do not really want to know, we largely do not care, and we say it as a matter of convention. We are sick as dogs, and reply, “*Good, and you?*” They say they are “*well,*” too, although they are sick as dogs, also.

It is meaningless. We utter *words, sounds*, only; fulfill conventions that are largely empty and would really be better left unsaid. We know this. And still do it ...

Clearly, this is not *always* the case. But it is, especially in congregational prayer, in group prayer, very often the case. We have said our Rosary, droned through all ten decades, picked up and moved on. We are satisfied. *We did the number.*

Matthew gave up his counting table for Christ — let us follow his example.

Pythagoras and the *Mathematikoi* did not know better. We do. Sincerely ask yourself: is the way you typically pray the way that you would speak to Christ *in Person*, pray to Mary *who stood before you*? Is this how you speak with your wife? Your children? Your neighbors?

Pray with your heart ... not on your fingers. God knows that you are saying much in saying little and saying little in saying much.

One is praying. One is counting.

In the way of things that lend themselves to numbers, you only need One.

Geoffrey K. Mondello  
Editor  
Boston Catholic Journal



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