

Century Marks

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Clemens and Charlie Brown © Mike Keefe, Denver Post

Recipe for living: Paul Coutinho, a Jesuit priest from India, reports that the year before he was ordained his godmother discovered she had cancer. At first she was depressed and scared, but then she had a deep experience of God that led her to say, "Today I do not pray for a cure for myself. I pray that God will help someone find a cure for cancer so that the thousands who come after me will profit and benefit from that cure." She had only one prayer for herself, that she would "live one day at a time and live as fully as I can," which she did. One of her last acts was to ask her husband for paper and a pencil. He thought she wanted to write her last will and testament, but instead she wrote down simple recipes he could use to feed their children (*How Big Is Your God?* Loyola Press).

You all: Sigmund Freud is supposed to have said upon reading the Sermon on the Mount, "Impossible." What Jesus commands is impossible if his sermon is read as a manual for personal ethics. However, David Buttrick argues that the commandments are meant to order communal life. When Jesus says that we're not to look lustfully on another person, he doesn't mean we have to shut off our sexual desires. Rather, Jesus is calling for "new-order 'sister/brother' communities in which sexuality does not disrupt the affections of our life together." When Jesus says "You" in the sermon, we should hear it as "You all"; he's addressing our life together (*Theology Today*, January).

Getting to know us: For 16 years the Archdiocese of Boston and the Anti-Defamation League have cosponsored New Directions, a program that trains Catholic school and religious education teachers about Judaism, with the hope of eliminating Christian anti-Semitism. But now the tables are being turned: Jewish day school and Hebrew school teachers in eastern Massachusetts are learning about Christianity. This interest is due to increased intermarriage between Jews and Christians and the fact that many of these teachers have students with a Christian parent or other Christian relatives. The Jewish educators admit that most of what has been included in their curricula heretofore has been negative—the Crusades and the Holocaust—and that many of their teachers are quite ignorant about Christian faith (*Boston Globe*, February 11).

Backing off: Duane Litfin, president of the evangelical Wheaton College in Illinois, and two other school officials have removed their names from a letter that calls for identifying common ground with Muslims. The open letter, drafted by Yale Divinity School's Center for Faith and Culture, was originally published with 130 signatories in the *New York Times* in November in response to a letter from more than 100 Muslim leaders. "I signed the statement because I am committed to the business of peacemaking and neighbor-love," said Wheaton's president. But after prompting from some evangelical critics, he restudied the document and decided that he did not agree with a section that speaks of Christians' seeking forgiveness for their sins against Muslims. He also thought references to "our common love for God" might be misunderstood. Andrew Saperstein of the Yale Center's Reconciliation Program said he didn't think the letter specifically states that Christians and Muslims worship the same God (RNS).

Newton's mistake: There are two sayings that astronomer Aileen O'Donoghue repeats to her students: "Science is the current best guess" and "You can't do science in your basement." By the first remark, she means that we can never be certain about scientific theories (which is not to say that theories are not to be taken seriously or that the theory of evolution, say, or Newton's law of gravity can be discarded). Her second point is that though you can do experiments in a basement, findings must be brought into the light of day and subjected to the scrutiny of the scientific community. The testing of some findings can take a long time—it took 300 years for an error to be discovered in Newton's *Principia* (*The Sky Is Not a Ceiling: An Astronomer's Faith*, Orbis).

All the news: The *Voice of San Diego* represents a new trend in journalism—a small, Web-based nonprofit publication supported by foundations and philanthropists and other donors. While it has a staff of only eight reporters and editors, it has done investigative reporting on issues that the conventional press has ignored. It uncovered the fact that the city’s account of crime statistics was way too rosy; that a city council member who urged water conservation was himself using 80,000 gallons of water a month at his house; and that the school board president was spending a third of his time out of town. *ProPublica*, another example of this kind of journalism, is about to be launched in New York. Its purpose will be to look at “people and institutions in our society that have power and have abused it, or have been entrusted with the public trust and have not lived up to it” (*Christian Science Monitor*, February 12).

Mixed message: When singer John Mellencamp discovered that John McCain was playing some of his songs at campaign rallies, Mellencamp’s publicist wrote to McCain to question this use of the songs. Mellencamp supported John Edwards until he dropped out of the race for president. The songs that McCain was using are populist and pro-labor in sentiment. In “Pink Houses” Mellencamp sings about a simple man who “pays for the thrills, the bills and the pills that kill.” And in “Our Country” he sings, “There’s room enough here for science to live, and there’s room enough here for religion to forgive” (AP).

Advice for fledgling authors: The late Aldous Huxley was often asked by aspiring writers for advice. Once, after reading a manuscript, Huxley gave this advice to its author: “You would do better, I believe, to leave the book for a year or two, forget it, then take it out, read it with new eyes and re-write it” (*Times Literary Supplement*, January 18).

Did you know? *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, Ben Franklin’s collection of aphorisms, was printed in at least 145 editions and six languages before the end of the 18th century. By his own admission, Franklin wrote only about one in ten of the sayings; the rest were adapted from other sources (*New Yorker*, January 28).

Say your prayers elsewhere: To illustrate a type of secularism hostile toward religion, sociologist Peter Berger tells an old Jewish joke: “A man tries to enter a synagogue during the High Holidays. The usher stops the man and says that only people with reserved seats may enter. ‘But it is a matter of life and death,’ says the man. ‘I must speak to Mr. Shapiro—his wife has been taken to the hospital.’ ‘All right,’ says the usher, ‘you can go in. *But don’t let me catch you praying*’” (*First Things*,

February).