

Century Marks

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Moratorium on prayer: Anthony Bloom, longtime head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain, was a noted authority on prayer. In an article published posthumously (*Theology Today*, April), Bloom admits that his prayers were once driven by the thought that if he didn't pray his world might collapse. His spiritual director told him that he wasn't trusting in God's love, care or providence, but rather was trusting in his prayers. The director forbade him to pray for awhile. Instead, he told Bloom, when people would come into his mind he was to thank God for them and for their love. Bloom concluded from this experience that he is safe because of the love of God and others for him, not because of his petitions. All of his life and his prayers, then, came under the rubric of gratitude—for the love of God and others for him, a love he didn't deserve.

Those lucky Orthodox: There are good reasons why Western Christians have difficulty communicating with Orthodox Christians, says Ellen Cherry. The East had no Pelagian controversy, so the Orthodox could pursue the perfection of monasticism unhindered; theology never became scholasticized there, so they don't have the West's preoccupation with theological method; they experienced no reformation, so doctrinal differences are not for them the engine that drives institutional maintenance; and they never had to confront modernity, so doubt about God never shook their theological verities. Salvation for the Orthodox was never seen as an individualistic escape from hell, but as participation in God's restoration of the world, just as it had been understood in the patristic era. Orthodox theology is not captive to the academy; it is directed toward the life of the church, especially prayer and worship. Without having gone through the Enlightenment, the Orthodox are more confident about the human possibility of knowing and obeying God, and of God's restoration of the world (*Theology Today*, April).

Good churches: What makes for a strong congregation? Is it size, worship style, leadership or clarity about mission? The conclusion of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey—which polled over 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations randomly selected throughout the country—is that strong congregations have

multiple strengths that interact. Factors in strong congregations, they conclude, are: spiritual growth, meaningful worship, active participation by members, a sense of belonging, care for children and youth, focus on the community, and a capacity for sharing the faith, welcoming new people, empowering leadership and looking to the future (Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations*, Westminster John Knox).

Paying for praise: The Reverend Jim Keyser of Grand Island, Nebraska, promises to say nice things about you at your funeral—for a fee. Keyser was trying to think of something he could auction off at a local Rotary fund raiser, and decided to auction off his services in the form of a friendly eulogy. The offer, which began tongue-in-cheek, took on a life of its own. And now an additional package is available—a funeral urn with cremation service (Associated Press, April 19).

The joy of selling books: When independent booksellers were asked what books they most enjoyed selling the past five years, they listed these works in the nonfiction category:

- *Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*, by Erik Larson (Vintage)
- *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*, by Alexandra Fuller (Random House)
- *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, by Eric Schlosser (Houghton Mifflin)
- *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich (Metropolitan Books)
- *Seabiscuit*, by Laura Hillenbrand (Ballantine Books)

For the booksellers' list of favorite fiction titles, see the May 4 Christian Century (booksense.com).

Good acts: Paul Simon, the late senator from Illinois, once said: "Over the years, I have come to realize that small acts of kindness are really the big things in the long run." Simon practiced what he preached, and his small book, *Fifty-two Simple Ways to Make a Difference* (Augsburg), suggests ways all of us can contribute to the common good. Here's a sampler: invite a couple or family of another race, religion

or ethnic group to dinner; schedule two television-free days and nights; do something not associated with your day-to-day work; select a developing nation and become informed about it; learn another language; visit someone in prison or help a former prisoner find a job. "Volunteer," says Simon, should be one of the most important words in your life. We can't take up all of Simon's suggestions at once, but there are 52 weeks in the year.

Get over it: George Mitchell, former senator from Maine, once told Arthur Schlesinger Jr. that historians worry too much about young Americans' lack of knowledge about history. Mitchell, who negotiated a peace settlement in Northern Ireland, said that the Irish know too much about their history, and they keep trying to reenact it by acting on resentments which are hundreds of years old. History, acknowledged Schlesinger, can be inappropriately used as a weapon or as the champion of narrow ethnic rivalries and nationalism (in Brian Lamb, *Book Notes on American Character*, Public Affairs).

Blowin' in the wind: What was Bob Dylan thinking when he signed on to appear with a scantily clothed model in a commercial for Victoria's Secret lingerie?