

# A potent brew

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

Like red wine, which we biblical literalists are commanded to take now and then, coffee, unanticipated in the scriptures, offers both an enhancement of and a threat to health. A recent issue of *Time* summarizes coffee's contradictory potentials. Between 1986 and 2000 scientists warned that coffee may cause—hold on to your cups—phobias, panic attacks, heart attacks, stress, osteoporosis, hypertension, higher cholesterol levels, delayed conception, miscarriages and underweight babies. Between 1988 and 2000 scientists promised that coffee might help prevent—pour another cup—asthma, colon and rectal cancer, impotence, mental sluggishness, fatal car accidents, suicide, gallstones, heart disease and Parkinson's disease.

How relate to all this? I instinctively do so by analogy, imperfect though such comparisons always are. Think of the inadequacy of St. Patrick's supposed analogy between three-leaf clovers and the Trinity. But emboldened by his Catholic example, I now reach to the depth of my own Lutheran heritage. That coffee is *simultaneously* justifiable and sinful triggered thought of one of our favorite Lutheran formulas: that the human made right with God is *simul justus et peccator*—at the same time justified and a sinner.

Note the analogy. The human is *justus* only in the eye of God, but remains *peccator* in the world's view. The coffee is *justus* to those of us who enjoy it, and *peccator* to those scrupulous about ingesting anything potentially harmful. There it is.

Now I know that won't satisfy many of my fellow Lutherans. We get pretty precise and antianalogous about our central teaching. Some critics even claim that we see ourselves not as justified by faith but as justified by faith in the proper doctrine of justification by faith. So when Lutherans and the Vatican last year signed a document marking breakthrough progress on a common understanding of justification, some critics criticized its Lutheran signers because Catholics had not cried "Uncle!"

We Lutherans like wine, coffee and garlic, but we remain wary of analogies between doctrine and natural substances, and have to keep on correcting the analogical

imagination of Catholics. An example to prompt wariness: at their ordination, our clergy vow to “teach in accordance with the Confessions of the Church.” Among these confessions are the “Epitome” (1:15) and the “Solid Declaration” (1:6) of *The Formula of Concord* (1577), which repudiate a garlician analogy to original sin but do not deny that “garlic juice, smeared upon a magnet, impedes but does not remove the natural powers of the magnet.” I don’t know whether Catholics are still stuck with the old magnet/garlic/original-sin analogy. I suppose we Lutherans would simply say that garlic at the same time impedes but does not impede, or removes but does not remove, the natural powers of the magnet. Another score of years of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue ought to tidy up these leftover conflicts.

If I know us Lutherans, however, we’ll be so busy testing the qualities of magnets and garlic and watching how our fellow confessors do so that we will *simul* attract anyone wearing steel and repel him by our smell. Or we can go back and smell our decaffeinated coffee, which is neither bad nor good for anyone, whether separately or at the same time. I can think of some good analogies between that blahness and all kinds of contemporary religion.