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When all I want is a Blue Moon ...

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Jul. 2, 2012 My Table Is Spread

A friend emailed me the other day. She wanted to know if I was experiencing the same "Catholic fatigue" that ails her. You know the symptoms: You're at a party, headed for the beer cooler, when someone whose face you recognize but whose name you don't know pins you up against the stainless steel Sub-Zero and begins to depose you on Catholic hospitals (all of them) and the Plan B contraceptive.

It does no good to explain that you just now learned to set the alarm on your cell phone, that you still can't multiply fractions without a piece of scratch paper handy and that you are perhaps not the person best-qualified to speak about the chemical properties or uses (and misuses) of any particular pharmaceutical. Would it clarify the situation, you wonder, if you told your interlocutor that a woman who classified every pill from aspirin to oxycodone as, simply, "ease medicine" raised you?

It would not. Word has spread that I write for "some Catholic newspaper," and so, it is thought, I am in on the daily phone briefings from Rome. My friend is a theology professor at a Catholic college and so, it is assumed, she must be the one setting the agenda for the phone briefing. Except that she's a woman, by which our more hostile interrogators infer that she's making coffee for the people planning the phone call, all the while eavesdropping on the daily marching orders for Catholics around the world.

Sound a little Dan Brown? Well, that's how it feels. I just want a beer, maybe a Blue Moon, garnished with one of those orange slices I see glistening in a bowl on the counter. But standing between me and my beer is the person who demands to know if I know that studies show that 98 percent of all Catholic women (and here the script shifts subtlety from one person to the next) do use birth control or have used birth control at some time in their lives or know or have hired or are related to people who use birth control. And why are we all such hypocrites?

Depending on how thirsty I am, my response might vary from: "Really?" to "What study?" to "How does anyone know this?" I mean, I'm a Catholic woman. I'm a Catholic woman who's in on the phone call and no one has ever asked me.

And there's always, "I'm pretty suspicious of any 98 to 100 percent claims concerning women, unless it involves chocolate."

As to the question of why we are all such hypocrites, I could bring up original sin or the nod vice pays to virtue, but I usually just wind up copping to the charge. For all of us. (Sorry, entire Catholic population of Nigeria, but that's how these encounters go; it's an all-or-nothing deal.)

I understand hypocrisy, being a lifelong practitioner. I will explain the harm gossip does in a parish if you'll hold on a sec while I call my friend X and let her know what her supposed friend Y said about her at the last parish council meeting.

And I'm pretty sure that the 98 percent figure for all Catholics (and humans) surveyed (somewhere, by somebody; I read it online) may actually be low when it comes to hypocrisy.

Sometimes I'm further delayed by this current gotcha question: "If Jehovah's Witnesses are required to provide coverage for blood transfusions to their employees, why shouldn't Catholic hospitals be required to provide contraceptives for its employees?"

Here, the number of beers I've had before heading for the just-out-of-reach Blue Moon is key. Stone cold sober, I will explain that I am not up to speed on the law regarding Witnesses and government-mandated blood transfusions. Two beers in, I will get going on how much I love, love, love Barbara Grizutti Harrison's memoir about growing up a Jehovah's Witness, *Visions of Glory*, and how bummed I was when she died 10 years ago and how you should really read her book.

That may earn me a pass. Or I may get the next current gotcha question, "But *The Christian Science Monitor* provides health care for its employees and the Christian Scientists don't even believe in health care."

If I'm feeling more thirsty than argumentative, I will explain, truthfully, that I do not know the details of the health care agreements, or, indeed, any employment agreements, between *The Christian Science Monitor* and its staff.

If I'm feeling more argumentative than thirsty, I might point out that there are places -- Planned Parenthood comes to mind -- where a woman can walk in and come out with a free supply of birth control pills but the stand-alone clinics offering free, walk-in neurosurgery are but a distant dream.

My friend and I long for some small, little-known sect that nobody cares about. We don't want to belong. We just want to vacation there for a while. Just to experience the ease of mentioning as we sidle up to the bar, "Well, I'm a member of the Church-the-Full-Name-of-Which-Nobody-Bothers-to-Remember, but I find I'm closest to God while practicing mindful cannibalism," to a group of people who nod and go right on with their conversations.

"How interesting," a few may murmur. "Didn't you meet some cannibals on your last trip down the Amazon?" another may ask her friend.

And they will agree that, while cannibalism is certainly not for everyone, it is low-carb. And, you have to admit, those cannibals, they don't tell you New York strip is on the menu when it's really you.

At least they're not hypocrites.

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