

Happy Birthday To Me!

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 27, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Formerly, I hated celebrating my birthday. It is the narcissism of youth I suppose that we think getting older is a bad thing and, in our American culture, the celebration of youth was and is ubiquitous. It was a bishop friend who, on learning of my distaste for marking my birthday, challenged me: "That's not very pro-life!" And, indeed it is not. So, today, I give thanks for the fact of being born.

When the prospect of hitting 30 loomed, I decided to go someplace where I would know no one and booked a flight to Russia. As the date of my departure neared, however, I thought twice about spending a week in a country where I did not speak the language nor read the alphabet and arranged to meet up in Moscow with a friend of a friend who served as my tour guide. Russians know how to party, to be sure, so a fun time was had, not least because I had hard currency and my new Russian friends could party in ways not normally available to them. I collected some wonderful memories from that trip – walking the streets and canals of St. Petersburg, the haunting beauty of the cathedrals in the Kremlin, attending a Communist Party rally at Gorki Park – "Let Marilyn Monroe drown in her Western perfume. Her beauty is as nothing compared to that of the Soviet woman," we were told. I collected, too, some beautiful woodcuts that always recall the trip when I walk into my home. And, at the Dom Knigi in Moscow that I purchased the prize volume of my personal library, a 1774 biography of Pope Clement XIV in French, "avec la approbation de la Roi," which I enjoy showing to my Jesuit friends.

Turning thirty-four was a memorable event. At the suggestion of one of the waiters with whom I worked, I themed the party "One Year Older Than Jesus." We started with a Mass, in Latin, in the St. Anthony Chapel at St. Matthew's Cathedral. If memory serves, there were eleven priests concelebrating. We put together a little choir and the organist, Dr. Mary Beth Bennett, premiered a chorale prelude she had written for the occasion on the tune "Darwall," which most Catholics know as "Rejoice, the Lord is King," but we borrowed the text from the 1940 Episcopal Hymnal and sang "Ye Holy Angels Bright." It is a wonderful hymn and I will place a video of it being sung at the bottom of the post. Then, a friend who had just opened a new restaurant, Felix, hosted the party, a buffet dinner for about 100. That was back when I worked at Kramer's and knew everyone and made lots of money. *Vanitas vanitorum*. Alas.

Since turning forty, I have spent every birthday in Puerto Rico. I would invite different friends to come down, and so I have had the opportunity of sharing the beauties of that island with some forty friends in the intervening years. On the actual date of my birthday, we have Mass at the cathedral in Old San Juan or at the Arzobispado: The oldest parts of the cathedral date to 1521 and the Arzobispado was built in the 1540s. Since my mother died, it has been just myself, my Dad and my uncle, and a friend who loves the island and who is able to help keep an eye on my Dad and my uncle, both of whom are now in their 80s yet still inclined to get into trouble if left to their own devices. Last year my niece joined us and she will again this year. We had to delay a few days because my friend is in law school and has spring break next week. Each morning, I will walk the beach where my mother would walk, and she would always say the same thing: "This is as close to heaven as I am ever going to get." I suspect she was wrong about that, but the sentiment is understandable if you have ever walked the beach at Luquillo.

When you get to the mid-40s, you realize upon your birthday that you are, in all probability, more than halfway home. Having a glitzy celebration seems less important. Indeed, having plenty of money and stuff seems less important. We need enough to meet our responsibilities and to provide for our loved ones, no more, no less. One's gratitude begins to focus on different things. In recent years, one of the things I have become most grateful for is finding a professional home here at the National Catholic Reporter. Ever since I was a teenager, I knew that the Catholic Church was the thing I cared about most in this world, that my faith was the wellspring from which all that matters to me flowed. Seminary did not work out. Running a restaurant for 17 years was fun and allowed me the time to read lots of books. But, I think I have finally found my vocation, or my vocation has found me. It is a blessing to wake up each morning and think, "What shall I write about today?" and then write it. I intend to keep this job until my dying day. Indeed, it is my fondest earthly desire that when it is time for the God Lord to call me home, He shall deliver a massive stroke or attack just after I have finished posting my morning blog and, as my body crumbles, my nose will fall forward and hit the "publish" button. What a way to go!

But, let's banish such thoughts for another time. Today, I am happy to have lived 52 years on this planet. I am happy to have been a baptized member of the Christian faith for almost that entire time and a communicant in the Catholic Church for all but the first six or seven years. I am happy that the Church has become my vocation as well as my greatest love. I am happy to be able to go, in a few days, to that wonderful, enchanted island with its wonderful people and beautiful beaches and so many family memories. And, I am very grateful to you, dear readers, for your support of NCR and for your interest, hostile or otherwise, in what I have to write each morning. *Ad multos annos* ? to me!

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