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In the Habit: A History of Catholicism and Tobacco

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Saints who smoked, popes who puffed, and others who snuffed.

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Ad Maioram Dei Gloriam Sold to American



In 1873, impoverished Confederate veteran Chiswell Langhorne (left) moved his family from Lynchburg to Danville, Virginia and began looking for work. The owner of a Danville tobacco warehouse had recently developed a new system of selling tobacco by auction: Instead of having farmers' tobacco hogsheads sampled for interested buyers, the warehouse owner had all the tobacco laid out in long rows for auction. Langhorne, a lively character with a taste for showing off, got the idea that he would make his mark somehow in the newly flourishing Danville tobacco

trade.

He was an Episcopalian, but while visiting a Catholic friend in Richmond around this time, he attended Mass with him one Sunday morning and heard the priest's Gregorian chant. Langhorne "reasoned that maybe he could supply the entertainment needs of warehousemen back home by emulating the priest's stimulating chant, along with what he later coined, a 'pitter-patter' and 'gobble gook' that would stimulate the buyers and be pleasing to the gathering public."

He added his own rhythmic body language and thereby created a fast-paced and entertaining auctioneering chant that allowed buyers moving along the rows of tobacco to track the rapid progress of the sales.

It served Langhorne well, as it has the generations of tobacco auctioneers that came after him, each one adding his own style. After his auctioneering success brought Langhorne some money, he began investing in the railroads that transported the tobacco from Danville, left the auctioneering business, and eventually made a fortune, allowing his family to move to an estate near Charlottesville



and work itself back into the Virginia aristocracy. His daughter Irene married illustrator Charles Dana Gibson and became the model for his Gibson girl drawings, and his daughter Nancy married Waldorf Astor in England, was elected to Parliament, converted from the Episcopal Church to Christian Science, and became virulently anti-Catholic, despite the fact that, as we may say, her family's success wound back, like a twist of tobacco, to her father's having heard Gregorian chant one Sunday at high Mass. (Right: Danville auction warehouse postcard, 1946)

Ex Fumo Dare Lucem

At the time just after Spanish explorers were introduced to tobacco by way of Columbus' voyages, smoking or snuffing it—as the New World natives did—carried with it something of an air of devilry because natives saw in it a connection to invisible spirits. To some of



the most earnest missionary clergy, the wreaths of its smoke and its action upon the spirits of those who imbibed it were a kind of sacramental parody of the Church's sacraments, established in the New World beforehand by the Devil in order to hinder its evangelization. (Left: *Les fumeurs et les priseurs*—New York Public Library)

By 1575, provincial synods in the New World already had to address the fact that Indians, converting to Catholicism, had brought the practice of smoking into churches during the liturgy—tobacco smoke, in their traditions, evoked the spirits. They offered its smoke as incense, or mixed into other incense. Mexican ecclesiastical authorities forbade smoking in church in the Americas

Church authorities in Mexico and Peru set ecclesiastical discipline for New Spain and other parts of America. In 1583, a synod in Lima declared, "It is forbidden under penalty of eternal damnation for priests, about to administer the sacraments, either to take the smoke of *sayri*, or tobacco, into the mouth, or the powder of tobacco into the nose, even under the guise of medicine, before the service of the mass." In 1588, the college of cardinals in Rome approved the prohibition as it applied to the Spanish colonies in America. (The practice returned the 1980s, among some American Indian Catholics, with burning tobacco and sweetgrass before Mass as their way of blending Native American beliefs and Catholic liturgy).

But the issue did not confine itself to the Americas. The use of tobacco—smoking, snuffing, and chewing—was very quickly spreading across the Old World too. And spreading among both laity and clergy. The matter was confusing: There was no shortage of people who abhorred the use of tobacco as unhealthy, dirty, addicting, and even sinful; but there were also many people who pointed to its benefits, its calming effects, the large and small pleasures in its use, its capacity to foster sociability (perhaps to a hoped-for peace of nations, an international brotherhood of smoke), and even (in the case of nasal snuff) its medical efficacy as a way to clear the sinuses by inducing a cephalic purge.



Nevertheless, the issue of using tobacco in church quickly arose in Europe, just as it had in New Spain, and it had to do with the question of sacrilege during Mass. One Sunday in Naples, a priest while celebrating Mass took a pinch of nasal snuff just after receiving Holy Communion. It appears he was not an experienced snuffer because he fell into a fit of sneezing, which caused him to vomit the Blessed Sacrament on to the altar in front of his horrified congregation. (Right: "The Three Inseparables," 111 brand cigarette ad, 1921)

As tobacco use spread through the Catholic clergy of Europe, the Church focused on its intrusion into church. What was anathematized was not its use per se but rather its use prior to or during the liturgy. And especially by the clergy, who were expected to maintain the absolute purity and cleanliness of the altar, the liturgical vestments, and of the hands that were consecrating the Host. Tobacco smoke did not equal incense.



Pope Urban VIII, on January 30, 1642 issued a bull *Cum Ecclesiae*, in which he responded to complaints by the Dean of the Cathedral of Seville, by declaring that anyone taking tobacco by mouth or nose, either in whole pieces, shredded, powdered, or smoked in a pipe, in the churches in the Diocese of Seville, would receive the penalty of excommunication *latae sententiae*.

The reason for the prohibition, he explained, was to protect the Mass and the churches from defilement. In Seville, the bad habit of using tobacco had increased so much, he said, that men and women, clergy and laity, "either while they were performing their services in the choir and at the altar, or while they were listening to the Mass and the divine offices, [who] were not at the same time, and with great irreverence, taking tobacco; and with fetid excrements sullyng the altar, holy place places and pavements of the churches of that diocese." Some priests, apparently, had gone so far as to place their snuff-boxes on the altar while they were saying Mass.

Afterwards, in Rome, a taunting pasquinade appeared as a comment on the bull: "*Contra folium quod vento rapitur ostendis potentiam tuam, et stipulam siccam persequeris.*" ("Wilt thou frighten a driven leaf and pursue dry chaff?" Job 13:25).

This ban has generated a vast amount of urban (Urban?) legend over the centuries, compounded by corrupted hearsay and misattribution—some reported this as a worldwide ban on the use of tobacco, some attributed it to the wrong pope or gave the wrong date, and some have even said that the pope banned tobacco use because he bizarrely believed that the sneezing that snuff caused resembled sexual ecstasy, which was inappropriate in church. (Hey, mister pope! Keep your rosaries out of our nose-aries!) Lately, the hoary legend has become so thread-worn and eroded that poor Pope Urban VIII has even been accused of the unlikely insanity of trying to prohibit sneezing, full stop.

In 1650, eight years after Urban VIII's bull, Innocent X laid the same penalty for using tobacco in the chapels, in the sacristy, or in the portico of the archbasilica of St. John Lateran or in St. Peter's in Rome, the reason being that he had spent plenty of time, talent, and money embellishing them, installing precious marbles into the floors and ornamenting the chapels with bas-reliefs, and he did not want them sullied with tobacco juice and smoke. Innocent XI later reiterated the bull.

By 1685, some theologians were debating whether Urban VIII's and Innocent X's bulls might be implicitly understood to apply to the Church Universal, and, if so, they wondered how it applied to all of a church's property (not just the sanctuary and the sacristy; some wondered whether the rectory was included).

Although Benedict XIII (a snuff-taker himself) reinforced the necessity to keep tobacco away from the altar and the tabernacle, in 1725 he revoked the penalty of excommunication for smoking in St. Peter's, because he recognized that church-goers were frequently slipping out of Mass for a while to catch a smoke or a snuff, and he had decided it better for them to stay inside and not disrupt or disturb the liturgy or miss part of it.

Did using tobacco break the fast before Communion? Alphonsus Ligouri (who was himself a snuff-taker), in his instruction manual for confessors, held that "tobacco taken through the nose does not break the fast, even though a portion of it should descend to the stomach." Nor "does the smoke of a cigarette break it," nor even tobacco chewed or "ground by the teeth provided the juice is spit out." Others of the time agreed, clarifying that if a significant amount of chewing tobacco was swallowed, the fast was broken.

The Pope's Nose

Benedict XIV was also a snuff-taker. He is said to have once offered his snuffbox to the head of some religious order, who declined to take a pinch of snuff, saying, "Your Holiness, I do not have that vice," to which the pope replied, "It is not a vice. If it were a vice you would have it."

Pius IX was an inveterate snuff-taker, and was so effusive and constant in it that he often

had to change his long white soutane a few times a day—it was white, after all, and the snuff dust would settle on it. He offered snuff, and snuff-boxes to visitors. The Church had established a monopoly on the tobacco trade in the Papal States and, in 1863, during his pontificate, consolidated its tobacco processing operations under the Pontifical Director of Salt and Tobacco in a newly erected building on the Piazza Mastai in the Trastevere district in Rome.

When the representative of Victor Emmanuel came to him to submit conditions that the pontiff believed were unacceptable, the pope “beat on the table with a snuff box, which then broke.” The representative “left so confused he appeared dizzy.” In 1871, the pope also, during the time he was the “prisoner of the Vatican,” offered up his “gold snuff-box, exquisitely carved with two symbolic lambs in the midst of flowers and foliage,” to be offered as the prize in a worldwide lottery to raise money for the Church. (Right: Audience with Pope Pius IX—Library of Congress)



Leo XIII favored snuff. Before he became pope, he had served for a time as papal nuncio in Brussels and enjoyed the conversation and company of the cultured and easy-going aristocrats there. One evening at dinner, a certain Count, who was a Freethinker, thought he would have a little fun at the nuncio's expense, and he handed him a snuff box to examine, which had on its cover a miniature painting of a beautiful nude Venus. “The men of the party watched the progress of the joke, and as for the Count he was choking with laughter, until the Nuncio deferentially returned the box with the remark: ‘Very pretty, indeed, Count. I presume it is the portrait of the Countess?’” Toward the end of the pope's life, he suffered when he had to give up tobacco on the advice of his physicians.



How about other modern popes? Pius X took snuff and smoked cigars. Benedict XV did not smoke and did not like others' smoke. Pius XI smoked an occasional cigar. Pius XII did not smoke. And John XXIII smoked cigarettes.

Paul VI was a non-smoker. So was John Paul I, though Vatican officials appeared to hint—just after his sudden, perplexing death—that his

final ill health might be due to heavy smoking.

John Paul II did not smoke, but Pope Benedict XVI reportedly does (or once did), apparently favoring Marlboros.

Holy Smokers

Venerable Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, having been shown the mantle of St. Teresa of Avila in the Carmelite convent in Paris, was allowed to put it on: “I kissed it; I pressed it upon me,” she wrote, “I remarked everything, even the little stains, which seemed to be of Spanish snuff.”

Tobacco use became an issue during the beatification investigations of Joseph of Cupertino, John Bosco, and Philip Neri. With the first two, the devil's advocates argued that heroic virtue did not apply because they used tobacco. Joseph's advocate argued, based on interviews with Joseph during his life, that his smoking was an aid to his holiness, helping him stay up at night for his devotions and extend his fasting. In the case of Philip Neri, the examination of his corpse during the investigation showed that the soft tissues of his nose had gone and so his body was not incorruptible. It was suggested that this was due to his heavy use of snuff. But these were weak arguments against their saintliness.

Bernadette Soubirous had childhood asthma and her physician prescribed snuff for it (her snuff box is on display at Lourdes, right). When she was sixteen, in school, she later remembered, “One Sister was shocked when I started everybody sneezing by passing snuff around while she droned away in French.” After she had entered the convent later in



life, "She produced her snuff box at recreation one day, to the great scandal of a Sister. She cried out: 'Oh, Sister Marie-Bernard, you will never be canonized.' 'Why not?' asked the 'snuffer.' 'Because you snuff. That bad habit almost disqualified St. Vincent de Paul.' 'And you, Sister Chantal,' twinkled Sister Marie-Bernard in reply, 'you are going to be canonized because you don't indulge.'"

St. John Vianney took snuff, often during his hours-long sessions hearing confessions. Padre Pio kept his snuff in a little pocket of his habit, and passed snuff around to his visitors. A biographer wrote that, "One evening, during a conference with oncologists, in the midst of a report on cancer research, Padre Pio turned to one of the men and asked, 'Do you smoke?' When the man replied in the affirmative, Pio, pointing his finger censoriously, chided, 'That's very bad,' then, with almost the same breath, turned to another doctor and asked, 'Have you got any snuff?'"

Jesuit Snuff

A Jesuit was asked whether it was licit to smoke a cigar while praying, and his answer was an unequivocal "no." However, the subtle Jesuit quickly added that, while it was not licit to smoke a cigar while praying, it was perfectly licit to pray while smoking a cigar. — St. Holger's Cigar Club

In the 16th and 17th centuries the Jesuits developed large tobacco plantations in Central and South America and held financial interests in retaining revenues from them. Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians had similar arrangements in Central America.

During this time, the Jesuits, fond of their snuff, were accused by their Protestant and secular opponents, without any evidence that I have found, of carrying poisoned snuff about their persons and offering it to those they attempted to assassinate. "Jesuit snuff," this imaginary stuff came to be called. The fear surrounding it appears to have been most intense after tens of thousands of barrels holding fifty tons of Spanish snuff were captured from Spanish ships in Vigo Bay in 1702 by English admiral Thomas Hopsonn and found their way into the British market.

At the same time, Jesuit missionaries introduced the snuff they loved to China's capitol during the Manchu dynasty, about 1715. For some time, Chinese converts to Catholicism were called "snuff-takers" by their countrymen and handled the manufacture and selling of snuff in Beijing. Many Tibetan Buddhist monks are still quite fond of snuff.



The Jesuits were not alone among the mendicant orders in their love of snuff. Laurence Sterne, author of *Tristram Shandy*, also wrote *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* in 1768, in which he described an incident—edifying and humbling to him—of exchanging snuff boxes with a poor friar. But during the 19th century, the fashion of using nasal snuff faded away, and cigar, pipe, and then cigarette smoking replaced it. Literary sources show that taking snuff was more and more left to the old and the poor, and to certain conservative clergy who persisted with their snuff rather than switch to smoking.

In an 1846 letter, Fr. William Faber, Priest of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, wrote, "At Florence, the Superior of the Camaldolese expressed a great desire to see me; he was ill in bed, and his bed full of snuff; he seized my head, buried it in the snuffy-clothes, and kissed me most unmercifully."

"Ten Years in Rome," an unsigned article published in 1870 in *The Galaxy* magazine, tells us, regarding Capuchin friars, "You see the specimen going about Rome in his dark-brown habit (from which keep clear), his black horn snuff-box, and his filthy blue cotton handkerchief stuffed in his sleeve, and his wallet hanging on his arm."

And Maud Howe, in an article published in *The Outlook*, entitled "Roman Codgers and Solitaries," commented, in 1898, upon a begging friar offering her a pinch of snuff from a shabby horn snuff-box. "Snuff is still taken in Italy by the old and the old-fashioned," she wrote, "and it has the sanction of the clergy. In Rome it is thought hardly seemly for a priest to smoke; they nearly all use snuff; indeed, I have seen a priest take a sly pinch

while officiating at the altar.”

An editorial writer in the *Dublin Review* of 1847 lamented that those making initial inquiries into the Faith often discovered “that the Catholic priests are generally only a poor, ill-instructed, snuff-taking, common sort of persons.” Ironically, the author wished for a different sort of priest, a “wise and winning” one—and gave as an example St. Philip Neri.

Into the 20th century, the dusting of clerical snuff signified being old-fashioned and out of touch, for James Joyce added the detail to his description of the decrepit priest, Fr. Flynn, in *Dubliners*.

In September 1957, Pius XII addressed the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus in Rome. He used the occasion to urge the Jesuits—as well as other religious orders—to tighten their discipline, and embrace austerity, partly by eliminating “superficial articles” from their lives, including “not a few comforts that laymen may legitimately demand.” “Among these,” he said, “must be included the use of tobacco, today so widespread and indulged in.” In the same spirit of abstinence, they “should not indulge in vacations outside their order houses without extraordinary reason nor undertake in the name of rest, long and costly pleasure trips.”

By 1964, the Jesuit magazine *America* was commending the U.S. Surgeon General's report on smoking soon after it was released.

And in 2002, John Paul II signed a law making it “forbidden to smoke in closed public places, places frequented by the public, and workplaces, situated in the territories of The Vatican, the areas beyond the borders of this State [that is, Vatican offices in other countries], and in public transportation means.” A fine of 30 Euros was set for violators.

A private pleasure, indulgence, and comfort, a means of social intercourse, a civic violation, a health hazard, an addiction, a nuisance, and a “vice.” But is using tobacco *per se* a sin? That question, dear reader, is, as they say, above my pay grade.

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