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6/6/06 -- Is It Going to Be a Devil of a Day?

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The Ledger

You would think that if the devil was going to have a son this week, he would have picked a better day than today.

Friday, everybody's working for the weekend. Saturday, idle hands are his playthings. Sunday, a slap in the face to the religious right.

But Tuesday?

Who plans an evil coup for Tuesday? Doesn't he know the only thing going on Tuesdays is kids eat free night at Denny's?

There it is though. Look at your calendar. Today is June 6, 2006.

Do you see now? It's the sixth day of the sixth month of the sixth year. That's 666!

Today is the most sinister day since June 6, 1906. And by all accounts, the devil's supposed to become somebody's baby daddy today.

Or is he? Perhaps we should consult the Good Book on this one.

"Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding count the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666," reads Revelation 13:18, according to the New King James Version.

Wait, what about the day, month, year thing. It's not there. What's going on here?

What does the church say about all this?

The Rev. Chris Hoffmann, pastor of St. Ann Catholic Church in Haines City, said the Bible only assigns a number to the beast. But the number has no relationship to the calendar, nor is there a date spelled out.

"People are fascinated by numbers and numerology," he said. "So perhaps someone said, 'Hey, this is clever.' There's nothing in the scripture to suggest this date . . . will be any better or any worse than any other date in history."

According to Phil Stevens, professor of anthropology at the State University of New York at Buffalo, the beast isn't even devilish.

"The problem is Christians don't read Revelation," Stevens said. "They've only heard about it."

He said the book of Revelation was written by a Christian exile known as John of Patmos, a Greek island. He said John wrote Revelation at the end of the first century, a time of great persecution of Christians. He said the book describes a series of weird visions.

"If you read it, it sounds like an acid trip," he said.

He said the beast in Revelation refers intermittently to Rome, to Roman emperors and to Roman cults of god- and emperorworship.

"The beast is not Satan," he said. "Satan is clearly identified in Revelation as the dragon."

OK, so what of this 666 business?

As the Bible reads, Stevens said, the number of the beast is the number of a person. He said Hebrews, like many cultures, assigned numeric values to letters.

"Usually the first letter is one, the second letter is two and so on," he said. ". . . The numeric value for the Hebrew letters for Nero is 666."

Nero? The emperor who supposedly fiddled as Rome burned? That guy?

Yes, said Stevens.

He said Nero was a terrible enemy of Christianity. When Revelation was written, he said, Nero was already dead. But he said there were persistent rumors that he would be resurrected.

Hoffmann agreed with Stevens' assertion that the book of Revelation is basically a rebuke of Rome and Nero.

But he said the book still has great teaching value. Hoffman said, the "beast" can symbolically be anything -- materialism, sexism, racism -- that influences people and turns them away from God. Revelation, he said, reminds people of such pitfalls.

The Catholic Church has always been cautious of making predictions about the future, Hoffman said. And he said the church doesn't want people pointing to individuals as the beast. He said scapegoating sin and evil leaves little room for reflection on one's own problems.

"Let's not only look outside, but let's look inside as well," he said.

That hasn't stopped people from speculating on the identity of the beast, which has since become confused with the legend of the antichrist, the devil's son or agent on earth.

Nero, Stevens said, was the first of many candidates, who have also included Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein and even Protestant leader Martin Luther.

There is even a wild conspiracy theory that Ronald Reagan was the antichrist. His home's street number was 666 until the town of Bel Air, Calif., changed it. And all three of his names, Ronald Wilson Reagan, have six letters. Again 666.

Marketing companies have seized on these conspiracy theories. Merchandise of all sorts are being released in conjunction with today's date.

That includes an updated version of "The Omen," which first aired 30 years ago to the date. The recent version debuts today, of course. In the plot, you guessed it, the devil's son Damien wreaks havoc just because he can.

"I guess it's just a clever tool that Hollywood is using," Hoffmann said.

But he's not surprised movie makers would use the book of Revelation as source material.

"It's really a good horror story," he said.

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