

THE NEED TO BE ENTERTAINED

William A. Donohue

Virtually everyone I know is sick and tired of the presidential debates, and it matters not a whit whether the person is a Republican or a Democrat. The general consensus is that the debates have become a circus, a nasty set of exchanges that do little to inform. But, boy, do they entertain. That, unfortunately, is the problem.

We are so bored. Ennui is everywhere, begging for relief from our listlessness. Constantly in need of being entertained, our tolerance for serious fare has declined markedly, leaving us impatient with settled conditions. So we reach for a button that will light up our senses with an audio or video experience that will send us into orbit. It works for a while, but it never lasts: the drudgery of daily living always returns, setting in motion the need for the next tonic.

What does this have to do with the presidential debates? Plenty. If we really wanted to have serious debates, there would be no live audience; just the candidates and the moderators. Take away the live audience and much of the problem would be solved: the candidates would have no one to gin up, and there would be no screaming fans or foes chiming in. A serious debate would also insist that as soon as someone interrupted another candidate, he or she would be asked to leave the stage.

With the theatrics eliminated, the circus element would vanish. But who would watch? Absent the entertainment factor, we'd be stuck listening to some pretty boring people speaking about some pretty boring things. This is not a matter of conjecture: before and after "Super Tuesday" there were some really heated Republican debates—things got out of hand. Then came the pivot: the next debate, hosted by CNN, was so sober

that the media said it was boring. The people agreed.

We want to be entertained. Just ask priests or teachers. Priests have a hard time reaching the faithful these days because our attention span is so short. Consequently, those who do not know how to give a homily often wind up telling jokes or walking down the aisle asking parishioners sophomoric questions. Teachers who can't teach show movies, have guest lectures, arrange day trips, or ask students to make presentations. That way they avoid being labeled a bore on student evaluations. The faithful and students may be entertained, but that is all.

We are so bored that sporting events can no longer stand by themselves. We have fireworks at ballparks, scoreboards that light up the sky, computer graphics that make us dizzy, loudspeakers that tell us when to shout, and concerts in the middle of the Super Bowl. The games just aren't enough to satisfy anymore.

Pick up almost any newspaper and what you find is a big celebrity section, a big movie and TV section, and a big sports section; only the news section has shrunk. Take away the puzzles and cartoons (more entertainment), and not much is left.

Come to think of it, the newspaper example isn't very good. People don't read much anymore—that takes work, and work is not entertaining.

When I was a kid, everyone read a newspaper on the Long Island Railroad; now few do. Today they are texting their friends (which is better than listening to their inane conversations on their cell phones). Or they are watching a TV show on their phones. Some are playing games. Others are listening to music. Still others are sending pictures of their baby or dog. They are all being entertained.

Matters get worse when passengers get to their destination.

People are increasingly oblivious to their surroundings, so wrapped up are they with their phones. With headsets in place, they set off on foot looking down at their phones—God forbid they might miss a message—never watching where they are going. So they crash into others. It's not just an urban problem: young people have been known to walk directly onto train tracks in rural areas, not hearing or seeing an oncoming train. One that I read about survived; the other did not.

Drivers do the same. How many times have you sat at an intersection waiting for the car in front of you to go when the light turns green and it doesn't. Invariably, the driver is too busy checking his emails to notice that the light has changed. Self-absorbed, these dopes tie up traffic and then resent it when you blow your horn. My horn is about worn out.

In the past, when friends and family members went to a restaurant, they actually spoke to each other. Now no one speaks—they are texting someone who is equally bored with his company. It has gotten so bad that I have had to tell the boys at my local pub to leave their bloody phones at home. A bar is supposed to be about camaraderie and conviviality, not talking to an invisible man.

It is not going to be easy getting through this presidential season. But if you get bored, reach for something other than your phone. Bend your elbow.