

13th August 2021

Countless

“Nobody can remember more than seven of anything.”

St Robert Bellarmine

as quoted by John Bossy in 'Christianity to the West, 1400-1700'

Robert Bellarmine was an Italian Jesuit priest and a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church from the late 16th and early 17th centuries. One of the most important figures in “The Counter Reformation”, he had a key role in the Church’s challenge of Galileo’s assertion that the earth went round the sun and wasn’t the centre of the universe. He was canonised a saint in 1930.

In 1597/1598, Bellarmine published a short and long Catechism, collections of the teachings of the Catholic Church. He managed, however, to omit the eight Beatitudes from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount”. But when challenged, he asserted: “Nobody can remember more than seven of anything!” So we’re OK, are we, with seven deadly sins, Seven Wonders of the World, the Magnificent Seven, seven dwarfs, or even Batman’s seven deadly enemies. But what about the eight Jungian cognitive functions, the nine muses in Greek mythology, the ten commandments, or the eleven members of the Rangers cup-winning team of 1962?

Elizabeth Barret Browning wrote in *Sonnet 43*:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Seven? Nah! This makes the ways of loving someone close to being countless in my book – even if a saint might have suggested otherwise.

A prayer for today

To love and be loved in countless ways? I'm way beyond seven anyway ...