

# Why I Filed Late This Year

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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I have always had trouble filing my taxes on time. Something always comes up to distract me at the last minute, to force me to file for an extension. But I wasn't going to let that happen this year. For once, I thought I'd have the tax deadline beat by more than a day. On Saturday I had filled out the last of the forms, checked my figures several times, written the check, and sealed the envelope. All I had to do was get some stamps and drop my return into the mail.

So on Sunday morning, full of that righteousness that comes with beating a deadline, I was in the post office. The lobby was closed, of course, but there were vending machines where I could get my stamps.

At that time of day on a Sunday, there is a profound calm to the post office, like the stillness of a church. The sound of my footsteps echoed between the marble floor and the high ceiling. The light coming from the high rows of mailboxes with their little glass windows even reminded me of the light that comes from stained glass.

I weighed my return, resolved to put one more stamp on it than the scale said it needed, then started to dig change out of my pocket to feed the machine. The coins, as they fell through the secret maze inside, made a kind of music:

Click clickety tick tick chuck.

Click clickety tick tick chuck.

One after another, quarter after quarter, I fed coins into the machine until one of them, instead of making the usual Click clickety tick tick chuck, went only Click.

I remember that I thought to myself, quite calmly, It's all right. The machine has jammed. You may not get your stamps, but the deadline for filing is still days away. Everything is still perfectly under control.

So, calm and full of hope, I pushed the button for my stamps, even though I knew very well that nothing would happen. And nothing did.

It's all right, I thought. This is just a minor glitch.

I pressed the coin return lever. Nothing.

Stay calm, I reminded myself. Relax.

In a very calm and relaxed fashion, I started to bang on the side of the vending machine, trying to coax the errant coin into its proper path so that I'd get my stamps or at least my money back.

But the coin didn't budge.

It doesn't matter, I reminded myself, still banging. What matters is that you're going to get your return in on time.

But the more I banged on the machine, the more I grew convinced that the coin was hovering on the edge of going down, that all it required was the right blow from just the right angle to send it on the rest of its path, to make it play the rest of its musical clickety tick tick chunk.

I pulled the coin return lever again, then resumed pounding at the machine's side.

My hand started to sting. "God bless this machine," I said under my breath, pounding even harder. "God bless it! God bless it!"

My face got hot as I fell into a rhythm of pounding, and with every blow, I said, "God bless! God bless!" I felt sweat forming on my brow. "God blessed machine!" I said through my teeth. "God bless! God bless!"

Suddenly, the post office was filled with sweet angelic voices, something like the Vienna Boys' Choir singing "Ave Maria," but indistinctly.

I stood back, looking around. There was smoke. I smelled incense. The vending machine was bathed in a warm, golden glow. I turned around to see where the light was coming from, and there stood the blessed virgin, just as I had imagined her when I was in grammar school, more beautiful than a movie star. She wore sunglasses.

Mary smiled beatifically, raised her hand as if to bless me, and then lunged toward the vending machine. It looked like she was going to put her shoulder to it, like a television cop breaking down a door, but I never saw her make contact. There was a blinding flash of brilliance, but no sound at all.

When I opened my eyes, she was gone. The invisible choir had stopped singing, or at least I think they had. It would have been hard to hear them over the sound of the quarters ringing as they streamed from the coin return slot like water from a fire hydrant.

I couldn't do anything for a moment but watch as the mound of coins spread across the floor. Quarters rolled to the far ends of the post office, and the shining pile in front of the machine was soon almost as high as the coin return. Even so, the machine kept spewing out silver.

When I was knee deep in quarters, I regained my presence of mind enough to reach down and scoop up a handful. That was when I felt a strong grip at my elbow.

"This is the Lord's money." The words were thickly accented.

I turned. There, in silver and gold vestments, stood the Pope.

I could not remember how to address him. Your Grace? Your Eminence? It had been so long ago that I had left the church. Then it came to me.

"Your Holiness," I said, "I'm only taking the money that I put into the machine to begin with."

"This is the Lord's money," he said again, as though he hadn't heard me.

The pile of quarters kept spreading across the room. It stretched nearly to the doors, now. "It's only a few bucks," I said. "Just the price of a book of stamps."

"The Lord's money," the Pope said, smiling gently and extending his open palm.

I gave him the quarters and he guided me across the room toward the door. The quarters were slippery. I almost fell, but the Pope had a good grip on my arm and kept me on my feet.

The quarters around the doors were ankle deep by then. His Holiness and I had a hard time getting them open.

On the front steps of the post office were three cardinals. One of them scooped up the coins that spilled from the open doors of the post office, and another took me by the arm and started to lead me toward the street. The first in a long line of armored trucks with Vatican plates was backing toward the bottom of the steps.

"Hey, wait a minute!" I said. "I left my tax return in there!" I tried to turn back, but the third cardinal appeared at my side, grabbing my other arm.

"But my tax return! My tax return!" The cardinals smiled the sympathetic smiles of men who speak no English, and they led me the rest of the way down the steps. They kept me sandwiched like that for three blocks, all the way past the cordon of nuns who, armed with wooden rulers, were holding back the crowds.

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