

Men's Limits

June 11, 2011

The discovery in early April, after a two-year hunt, of wreckage from the Air France Airbus which went down in mid-Atlantic on June 1, 2009, and the subsequent recovery of the aircraft's flight recorders known as "black boxes," have thrown an eerie light on the disaster, puzzling until now. What a drama! It seems that the Airbus 330-200 stalled at an altitude of 38,000 feet, and then for three and a half minutes tumbled straight down to crash into the ocean, causing everybody on board, 228 souls, to appear instantaneously before the judgment seat of God.

The initial problem for flight AF 447 could well have been nasty night-time weather high over the ocean two hours out from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil on the way to Paris. Conclusions from the evidence provided by the black boxes are not yet final, but the next problem may have been that the aircraft's air speed indicators, deriving information from pitot tubes, gave false readings to the pilots. When the aircraft began to stall, instead of putting the nose down to gather the speed necessary for the aircraft to start flying again, it seems that the pilots turned up the engines, which is another way of dealing with a stall situation, but they also pulled the nose up. More automatic stall warnings followed until the plane finally stalled, and once it began to fall the pilots seem to have been powerless to prevent the crash.

Were they intent upon climbing above the storm instead of pitching down into it? Were they relying too much on their electronics, apparently more and more dominant in aircraft cockpits? Did they panic? (How understandable if they did!) One awaits the final results of Air France's inquest as to the cause of the crash, but a few things in connection with it are certain.

We can any of us die at any moment, for a variety of causes. Will we at that moment of death have the time, grace and presence of mind to make an act of contrition sufficient to save our souls? A fear of imminent death can wipe out of the mind everything except the instinctive urge to survive. Now millions of intercontinental passengers are every year whisked safely over oceans by our brilliant flying machines, but these are puny things compared to the forces of nature. "Stop," said the storm, "you are not such masters of the elements as you think." And the passengers and crew, called violently back to reality from their in-flight movies and in-seat meals, must all have been gripped by a panic fear for most or all of the 210-second plunge to their death, as nature's law of gravity took over from man's ingenuity of flight.

Even after 672 days on the ocean-bed, the black boxes functioned perfectly, and now they are yielding up their secrets of the last minutes of flight AF 447. Clever idea! Clever design! But how many souls aboard that brilliant machine were ready to enter into eternity? And how many more might have been ready if only men devoted to the saving of their souls a small part of the intelligence and effort which they spend on their material machines? Mother of God, pray for us sinners that neither distraction nor panic may prevent us from putting and keeping our souls in order, "now and in the hour of our death."

Kyrie eleison.