

Life, filtered by community

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Adopted as a child, Philippa Palfrey as years harbors the comfortable fantasy that her biological parents were wealthy aristocrats. But when she obtains a copy of her birth certificate at the age of 18, her world turns upside down.

The young woman discovers that her father died in prison; her mother is about to be released from prison after serving time for killing a child. These discoveries occur in the novel titled "Innocent Blood," by British author P.D. James.

Just as I finished the absorbing novel, I coincidentally had an interview with theologian Anthony Tambasco. We were discussing how the church community tries to build on an individual's personal life.

The novel and the interview were unrelated. Nonetheless, they became related in my mind.

Tambasco, a professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., told about using the Gospel to lead students toward a better understanding of how Scripture and their personal histories relate.

A major theme in Mark's Gospel is the slowness of the disciples at recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus repeatedly warns people not to tell anyone what he has done to help them. Only after Jesus' death and resurrection do the disciples recognize what kind of Messiah Jesus is.

Explaining why Mark hammers this home, Tambasco said he

thinks Mark wants people to make a connection between the disciples and themselves — to enter into their own process of discovery. Mark pushes readers to see that by dealing with events in their own lives, they can come to discover who Jesus is and what he means.

Thinking this over, I was reminded again of "Innocent Blood." The unsettling events in Ms. Palfrey's life were a stark reminder that the personal events Mark urged people to deal with can be hard to handle, even overwhelming.

The novel's final chapter takes place after evening services in a chapel. Ms. Palfrey's comments then indicate that she somehow has come to terms with events — including an encounter with her biological mother — that led to a crucial turning point for her.

Reflecting on her life, I began to realize just how much is sometimes implied when we speak of the church as a compassionate and supportive community that can contribute to our individual lives. For Ms. Palfrey, an individual quest had become all-consuming and highly charged. On a less dramatic scale than that found in the novel, perhaps, most people have consuming individual or personal concerns.

How does the community dimension of church life help here? "Being with other people" in the church can be very helpful, Tambasco suggested. Listening to the readings or homilies during a liturgy, or sharing experiences with other Christians in small parish or family groups, helps people develop insights into their own experiences.

Think about what the Bible is, he proposed. "Ultimately it deals with every kind of situation." Also, particular biblical texts speak to people in different ways at different stages in their lives.

He noted that the Bible was developed in a community setting, to be read and shared.

"The faith experience builds on what we are as human beings," the professor observed. He drew a parallel between the way we grow as human beings and as believers. People learn what it is to be human by their association with others, not in isolation from each other.

Similarly, he continued, we become Christians and develop confidence in dealing with our personal history through seeing how other people have dealt — and are dealing — with similar situations.

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FOOD...

...for thought

Just how important is the community dimension of Christian life that one hears so much about today?

"Christian life and worship presuppose community — a willingness to learn from others and to be open to others," the U.S. bishops said in a recent message they issued on the liturgy.

In Christian life, an individual or personal spirituality is important. But it is incomplete, the bishops indicated, without the spirituality of the Christian community that worships together.

The bishops' message came on the 20th anniversary of Vatican Council II's Constitution on the Liturgy. The anniversary, they said, offered an opportunity not only to commemorate a past and significant event, "but also to evaluate its effect and to foster its continued importance for the future of the church."

One theme repeated over and over in the bishops' message concerns the value and the role of the community in Christian life. The bishops state:

—Much progress has been made over the past generation to help people develop a sense of communal prayer.

—Today's liturgy is a growing

sign and instrument of community — people at one with each other and with God.

—The personal prayer of individual Christians is important; it "ensures that they will come to the liturgy with the proper dispositions."

—Personal prayer, however, "does not displace the liturgy nor is it a substitute for it."

—"The way the church prays and worships should be the way individual Christians pray and worship. In that sense the liturgy is normative for Christian spirituality."

—The renewal of the Mass has set out "a rite that is simple and uncluttered, a rite which underscores the unity and bond of the assembly."

—One means by which Christ is manifested in worship is "through the community itself gathered in prayer and song."

God makes "close and intimate contact with each human life," said the bishops. "The generation after the council" is challenged "to stress the importance of prayer and especially liturgical prayer as the principal means by which God interacts with his people."

...for discussion

1. How would you discuss the following assertion? Problems can develop in a home because —

a) there is so much emphasis on the individual's needs that the needs of the family as a whole are neglected.

b) there is so much emphasis on the needs of the family as a whole that the needs of the individuals are neglected.

Do you agree that problems can develop for either of these reasons?

2. Do you think people ever achieve a perfect balance between their individual life and their life together with others? Between the personal and the community dimensions of life?

3. Why can Catherine de Hueck Doherty say, in the article by David Gibson, that community life enhances one's individuality?

4. Do you think that some time spent alone — even a brief time — can enhance what one brings to his or her life with others?

5. What difference do you think it makes that the church is a community? How many ways

can you think of in which the church, because it is a community, contributes to the personal lives of its members?

SECOND HELPINGS

Catherine de Hueck Doherty has written about the experiences of her life and her development as a Catholic lay woman in numerous books. "Fragments of My Life" contains her thoughts taken from different periods in her life. Chapters deal with her early memories as a child, growing up in Egypt, job hunting in New York, her identification with the poor and some comments on Vatican Council II. (Ave Maria Press, 1979, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556. \$3.95.) Another of her books, still available in some book stores and in libraries is titled "I Live on an Island."

midnight oil

On occasion, morning, place in absorbed The situated prayer toiling toil. imagine Paul. Yet t was. conser- ed about ult terrain vs. instructed s of Chris- g, time- all the supporting or ading of e extent to

which prayer was a force in his work. At times his prayer even reached mystical heights, as we read in the 12th chapter of the second letter to the Corinthians: "I know a man in Christ who, 14 years ago, was snatched up to the third heaven....to hear words which cannot be uttered, words which no man may speak." Though Paul doesn't say so, the man he knew was surely himself. What was true of the prophets, of Jesus and Paul, has been true of Christians in every age. A great many of the extraordinarily holy persons of history were extraordinarily busy people who maintained a consciousness of God's presence in their lives.

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