

Suffering should not be glamorized

By Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

The final days of Lent often find us focusing on the theme of suffering. Suffering is a strangely ambivalent topic for Christians. On the one hand, we know that God wants good things for all of us. God loves us as a human father loves his children — and human fathers never choose suffering for their children.

But we also have before us as Christians the figure of the suffering Christ; — the final act in the life of Jesus Christ was to "accept death, even death on a cross." The image of the suffering, dying Jesus is a strong and powerful part of our heritage and tradition.

The suffering of Christ has informed Christian thought and living in different ways across the course of our history. For the early martyrs, the suffering of Jesus became a great source of strength in the face of their own suffering and impending deaths. For some Christian ascetics, the suffering of Jesus became an example and a call to imitate his self-sacrifice in the lifestyles of extreme deprivation that they embraced.

At different times in our own lives Jesus' suffering on Calvary influences our faith in different ways. An intriguing interpretation of this reality is presented by the German the-



THE MORAL LIFE

ologian Johannes Metz in a number of his works.

Metz uses the phrase "the dangerous memory of Jesus" to talk about the central role Christ's suffering plays in our consciousness. For Metz, the church is best described as "the table and storytelling community." The church is a eucharistic communion of those called to tell and re-tell the story of the life and death of Jesus Christ. In telling the story over and over, we "keep the memory of Jesus alive." This is a major part of the church's mission.

But for Metz, the story and the memory of Jesus become danger-

ous. This is because Jesus represents and summarizes in his suffering and death all people who suffer and die because of the hard hearts of others. By keeping alive the memory of Jesus, Christians also recall so many other people who endure torture, humiliation and death at the hands of unjust and treacherous authorities.

This remembering is a dangerous activity because it inspires us to take up the cause of the suffering ones around us, and to resist individuals and systems that use violence and torture as a means to secure their own advantage and power. Remembering Jesus' suffering actually becomes an act of "subversion," as Christians — in the name of the suffering Christ — commit themselves to stand against repression and misery.

Metz's interpretation of the suffering of Christ is attractive in several ways. For example, it does not lead to a romantic "glorification" of suffering. Some spiritualities can seem almost to "recommend" suffering for Christians as if suffering of itself were a "good" in people's lives.

It is important not to romanticize suffering or to treat it as part of "God's will" for us. Suffering is to be resisted as a force in the world that happens *against* God's will. As Christians, we should be doing all

we can to eliminate suffering and to ease its burden on those who suffer.

Jesus, after all, was not committed to suffering, but to the coming of God's Kingdom on earth. He sought to inaugurate a vision of earthly life based on justice, peace, freedom and reconciliation. When it became clear that he would have to endure death on the cross in order to remain faithful to this vision, Jesus willingly and obediently laid down his life.

Our own commitment should also be to the Kingdom of God being inaugurated in our midst. Commitment to that Kingdom may, indeed, entail great cost to us. But we should be clear that we are committed not to suffering as such, but to faithfulness to our mission on behalf of the Kingdom of God.

God's reign on earth entails the end to all human arrangements that deny justice, peace, freedom and reconciliation. Like Jesus, we may provoke hatred and animosity on the part of those who hold power as we seek to act on behalf of the suffering people on this planet. We should all try to let the memory of Jesus' suffering and death become a bit "dangerous" in our own lives — inviting us to confront forces and authorities that keep suffering and repression alive in our country and on our planet.

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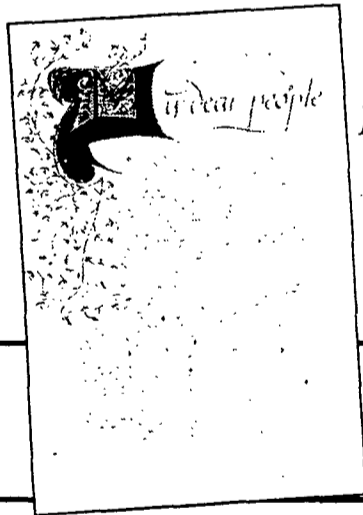
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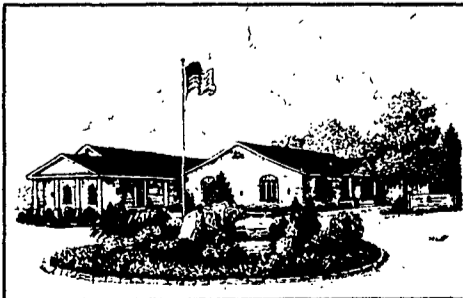
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