

COLUMNISTS

Faith is a matter of relationships

Last week I became involved in an interesting conversation about the place of "order" in current church practice. The gentlemen who spoke with me expressed the opinion that there seems to be a lack of emphasis on obedience in today's religious education of adults. This lack of stress on obedience can potentially lead to a lack of order in the church.

The context of our conversation was a class in which we discussed the meaning of "faith." I had opted to use the following definition: "Faith is a gift of God by which we freely accept God's self-communication in Christ."

That definition firmly situates faith where it belongs: as a gift of God. It also recognizes that we respond to God's gift and cannot ourselves initiate or control it. In addition, it amplifies the particular nature of our faith in God as Christian, and it gives clear emphasis to the fact that faith establishes a relationship between the believer and God. That is, faith is not simply intellectual assent to a given body of truth-statements. For us, faith is relational and gives rise to a relationship with God.

Faith is the absolute foundation of everything else in the Christian life and



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

faith. All that we believe, teach, celebrate and do as individual believers and as a church community, all that we adopt as institutional practice, exists to serve and express this "self communication of God," which we "freely accept."

Thus all of our community building, our rituals, spirituality, intellectual formulations, moral decisions, are built on the foundation of faith. The expressions of Catholicism that come to be important parts of our lives, including meaningful stories and passages from Scripture, prayers and readings we like and repeat often, favorite devotions, books and speakers, holy pictures and images we keep

around us or use in our homes — all these are important for us because they foster and depict God's self-communication to us and our free acceptance of this self-communication.

For us Catholics, our faith — our relationship with God — is always communal. That is, it is always rooted in the community of faith. Faith for us is mediated through the community of the church. Our encounters with God are not simply individual encounters, but always occur within the context of the community. Thus for us, the mystery of the church plays a significant part in all our theology, in the formulation of doctrine, in our pastoral practice, our moral vision and our devotional life.

So for us, all that comes to be proclaimed and lived as a church institution is important for our faith. But it is important to recognize that all our practices, doctrines, rituals, devotions, practices and beliefs take their existence and meaning because of their relation to the self-communication of God to us in Christ, and our response to it. This is true of the structures of organization and the type of order that we construct for the church as well.

Obviously, we in the United States are

influenced by the individualism that colors our entire way of life. We have to guard against the many temptations that the heightened individualism of our culture waves before us, and this certainly is the case in our attempts to live our faith, too. Some of these temptations may indeed encourage us to diminish the importance of the need for authority in church life.

Still, I think it is a mistake to put either obedience or "order" at the heart of the Catholic belief system. All that we call Catholic ought to exist because it fosters relationship with God — individually and corporately. Even our obedience and our attempts to order our individual and communal lives ought to be directed at fostering faith, and not vice versa.

Faith is a living reality, so it must adapt to new and living situations. Our expressions of faith and our manner of living it also must adapt to living situations of real people. Today, there is much we might say better about both obedience to authority and the ordering of our church structures. But these realities, like all other aspects of church life, must support our growth in faith, and not vice versa.

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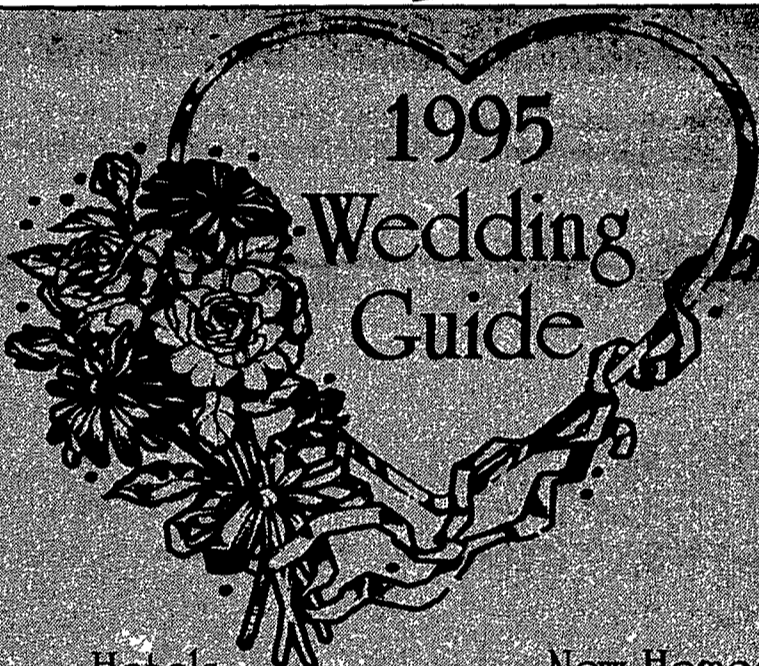
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