

# COLUMNISTS

## Let's turn to faith tradition in new year

Marking a new year is often disconcerting to me, since I seem to hold on to the same flaws and faults before and after midnight on the 31st of December. That may be true of most adults. The struggle toward fuller life is marked more by constancy and persistence than by dramatic endings and beginnings.

That may be true also of our common struggle to embody the Catholic faith in American culture at the end of the 20th century. We face the same difficulties and problems that have been part of our past, and we do so with the same limitations and shortcomings.

Thus American Catholics have always had difficulty in finding ways to let our faith, with its rich symbols and systems, inform our American way of life. At times we can seem less creative than other cultures, perhaps, in using our faith and its symbols to help us transform aspects of our culture that diminish the quality of human life.

Because of this, we risk taking on and interiorizing some of the worst aspects of our society. We lose our ability to be critical, and discerning as we accept society's standards for ourselves and for our children.

For example, people would say that U.S. culture places a huge emphasis on upward mobility, status and respectabil-



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ity. Subscribers to mainstream U.S. society value rising on the socio-economic scale almost more than anything else. We are also given to terrific activism that keeps us so frantically busy that we lack any time at all for self-reflection and self-assessment.

Our culture also places enormous value on pragmatism: If something isn't immediately useful, it has little importance for us. Thus we often overlook "useless" human moments, relationships, and the "wasted time" necessary for genuine interiority and introspection. The cultural mindset of the United States also dictates to us an almost limitless system of learned needs. We end up needing all sorts of things, many of which are for superfluous products and

luxuries that are not only unnecessary for genuine human living, but which even distract us from true "quality living."

Our culture is also fiercely individualistic. The individual, fueled by greed and uncontrolled competition, untrammelled by responsibility for the welfare of others or commitment to the common good, is the sole and total "bottom line" of American society. I take as a great symbol of our American individualism the "walkman," a device that allows us to individualize even the most social of our senses — the sense of hearing. I can even restrict and contain for myself what I listen to. That way, I don't have to negotiate with anyone else about what WE might hear together.

Aspects of our faith tradition would help us to challenge and transform some of these dominant attitudes, which can work to diminish our lives rather than enhance them. I think for example of the figure of Mary, who is such a great symbol of receptivity before God, who "ponders in her heart" the central mysteries of God's presence among us, who has been an example of wisdom, freedom and peace from the very beginning of Catholicism.

We need, I think, to search for ways to recast our devotion to Mary so that she

informs our search for spiritual renewal in a way that can strengthen us in this culture. At times we can appear to offer outdated forms of Marian devotions that address not today's culture, but which harken back in nostalgic comfort for simpler "days gone by." Our religious imaginations might help us to formulate newer, better forms of expressing our devotion to Mary — that allow her strength and focus on the truly meaningful to inform and challenge our lives today.

The Catholic tradition has also placed enormous significance on the common good and on the necessity for ethical judgments made for reasons other than pure pragmatism or increased economic power for some. Moral virtue in Catholicism has drawn us beyond "care for our own alone" toward communal values, bonds of loyalty, and resistance to forces that diminish our capacity for human society.

As we enter into the new year, our struggles to be Catholic in America will probably not be solved any more than our personal struggles for character formation will be. In fact, our struggle will look very much like it did LAST year. Perhaps we can dip into our tradition in new ways, however, to find genuine aids to better, fuller lives.

### Sr. Mary Gerard Flagler, SSJ, 86; served as Nazareth asst. treasurer

Sister Mary Gerard Flagler, SSJ, 86, died Dec. 13, 1995, at the St. Joseph Convent Infirmary, 4199 East Ave., Rochester.

Her funeral liturgy was celebrated in the motherhouse chapel Dec. 18, by Msgr. William Shannon, assisted by Msgr. Joseph Sullivan and Fathers Joseph Donovan, John Hayes, Joseph Trovato, CSB, John Cavanaugh, CSB, Albert Gaelens, CSB, and Dennis Kauffman, CSB.

A native of Brockport, Sister Mary Gerard taught at St. Francis de Sales School, Geneva (1928-34); Aquinas Institute (1934-46); and Nazareth College Business Department (1946-58). From 1958 to 1988 she served as assistant treasurer at Nazareth College.

Sister Mary Gerard entered the Sisters of St. Joseph from Holy Apostles Parish in 1926. She earned her bachelor's degree from St. Bonaventure University, Olean, N.Y., and her master's degree in business education from New York University.

A longtime friend, Sister Louise Weber, SSJ, taught briefly at Aquinas with Sister Mary Gerard, and taxied there with her.

"She had a special gift of knowing how to relate to the students at Aquinas Institute when there were just young men there," Sister Weber said. "She was well-liked there. One of the students Sister taught more than 40 years ago came to the infirmary to visit her."

"She was always a woman of strong faith and a very prayerful woman," Sister Weber added.

Sister Mary Gerard is survived by one sister and brother-in-law, Herbert and Mary Herrmann; two brothers and sisters-in-law, Henry and Grace Flagler, and Paul and Gelia Flagler; a cousin, Father Bernard Carges, pastor, Immaculate Conception Church, Ithaca; nieces and nephews; and her sisters in the Congregation of St. Joseph. Burial was in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

—Kathleen Schwarz

### Volunteer's efforts garner a \$600 grant from American Express for St. Monica's

ROCHESTER — In recognition of one man's volunteer work, St. Monica's School, 841 Genesee St., has received a \$600 grant from the American Express Foundation.

The money will buy literary books for the school library and for each grade, pre-kindergarten through sixth.

Dan Heffernan, a financial advisor with American Express Financial Advisors and a former science teacher, helped set up a science program for St. Monica's second grade, according to its teacher, Robin Parker. After she told him the school also needed non-curriculum books for the students, Heffernan applied for the grant.

In 1994, American Express Company established the Volunteer Action Fund to recognize employees who do volunteer work in the community. The fund has doled out more than \$150,000 in grants to more than 200 organizations for whom its employees

volunteer, according to a company press release.

Heffernan — who advises Parker on her personal financial portfolio — was a science teacher in the Rochester City School District for 11 years before joining American Express six years ago. Both he and Parker noted that their friendship led to his decision to volunteer at the school.

"I like the philosophy there," Heffernan, a Penfield resident, said, pointing out that the school requires students' parents to attend church, volunteer at St. Monica's, and attend parent/teacher meetings.

Parker expressed gratitude for Heffernan's diligence in pursuing the grant.

"He is Catholic, went to Catholic schools, and wanted to support Catholic education," she said.

Heffernan also plans to read to second-graders at least once a week.

—Rob Cullinan

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