

# COLUMNISTS

## Finally, a fitting way to observe Holy Week

I have often puzzled over what it means to say that we are saved by the death of Jesus. The solemnity of the rituals that mark Holy Week, and the somber tone that surrounds these days have always intrigued me. I have often been dissatisfied with myself and the way I participate in this important part of the liturgical year. In fact, I seem to alternate between the thought that I haven't been sad enough over Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and then that I haven't been joyful enough when it is finally time for the Easter Vigil service and the dawn of Easter Sunday.

Over the course of my life, I have tried to articulate for myself just how the death of someone, particularly the Son of God, resulted in his resurrection and then in life for all the rest of us. I have come up with any number of great explanations of this mystery. But in the case of almost all of them, I end up finding them inadequate almost before I have fully "concocted" them.

For a while I thought that it was the amount of suffering that Jesus endured that brought about such splendid results. Since he had so many terrible things done to him through that terrible night, and since they hurt him so much, his reward was proportionate to his misery. The greater the suffering, the



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

greater the joy. I concluded that all suffering was really quite beneficial, in the scheme of God.

This theory held me for quite a while. While in its grip, I decided on some corollary views that went right along quite naturally. I decided that since suffering brings about good, we all ought to try to suffer as much as possible. I decided that God was the sort of being who is happiest when we creatures are most miserable. I myself took great pains during this time to enhance the opportunity for suffering whenever I had the chance. People who knew me then would agree, I think, that I surely did my part to "complete the sufferings of Jesus!" And by my very disposition, I helped those around me to do this, too.

But some important questions arose around this explanation for the mystery at the very heart of our faith. For one thing, it just doesn't ring true for me that suffering automatically results in good. While I know people who have managed to turn suffering into great good, I also know instances of suffering that result in great evil, bitterness, and human diminishment. We rightly spend much of our best Christian and human energy, talent and resources trying to relieve suffering. Very few parents, for example, hope for their children a life of suffering, for heaven's sake!

So I concluded that while we all suffer in the course of our lives, and while we have to work through the losses and diminishments that befall us trying to let "all things work toward good," it wasn't the fact of Jesus' suffering that became the source of salvation.

Through some wiser thought and some better instruction I have since learned of a more satisfactory way to think about the death and resurrection of Jesus. I now think in terms of Jesus as God's faithful Son who came among us to show us who God is and how we can love as God loves.

But we failed to catch on to this message because of our sinfulness, and we

rejected it. The personal and social changes necessary to let God's love take root in us and among us were so threatening that we moved against Jesus. In spite of our rejection and the violence we waged against him, Jesus remained true to his mission of inaugurating the kingdom on earth. Even in the face of death itself, Jesus kept on track and continued to speak and act on behalf of God's kingdom. Even when he knew that he would likely enter into deadly conflict and die, Jesus remained faithful to God and obedient to the mission entrusted to him.

For Jesus, living in fidelity to the love of God was worth his life. Being faithful to the kingdom was worth suffering for. It was even worth dying for.

This year my commemoration of Holy Week will center on this sort of reflection. Because of his absolute faithfulness to God, even death was not able to hold Jesus. Instead, God raised him from the dead. And in the Risen Christ we are all able to enter into the love of God that is eternal life. The point of Holy Week is, finally, not the suffering. The point of Holy Week is not the death. The point of Holy Week is the Life. Happy Easter to all.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute, Rochester.

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