

COLUMNISTS

Faith demands more than just avoiding sin

A criticism sometimes leveled against Catholic moral thinking is that we are more concerned about sin than we are about conversion. Some say we are prone to focus more on the negative aspects of human action than on the positive. There are many who accuse us of reducing the moral life to "keeping the rules," thus avoiding questions about how we respond positively to Jesus' positive command to "love God with all our heart, and all our soul and all our mind."

I agree that we do sometimes seem to neglect what might be described as "the other side of sin," the great theme of conversion. In many ways this is odd, since the very mission of the church is conversion: The mission of the church is assisting in the conversion of our hearts and minds to God.

Part of the problem, of course, is that for many of us, when we hear the word "conversion" we immediately think of people changing their religious affiliation. We too easily think of conversion exclusively in terms of people moving from membership in one denomination to another.

But a far deeper meaning of this reality, a meaning at the very core of faith, refers to the radical, total transformation of the person. In this sense conversion indicates a complete "turn-



the
moral
life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ing inside out" of an individual. A radical metamorphosis of an individual from someone who doesn't accept God, to someone who does.

Now for some people, the reality of this kind of "conversion" happens dramatically all at once. But for most of us, this radical "turning toward God" is gradual, and actually happens in stages over the whole course of our lifetime. We move from one level of acceptance of God to another, sometimes in ways that may appear to be unremarkable.

One could say, I suppose, that the story of any human life is the story of that individual's moving from one image of God to another — shifting, through many twists and turns and detours, to truer, deeper, and more real notions of who God is. And in the

process, we uncover who we are, too.

The story of Scripture might be described as this very story: God's people move in stages through various "images of God" to images that become closer and closer to the truth. As God's people discover who God is, they discover much about themselves, too, and they move to a relationship with God that, gradually and over stages, becomes deeper and deeper.

As to how our conversion takes place, we have to attend to the experiences of our lives, the people we relate to, the communities of which we are a part, the ways we reflect on and "handle" our experiences, and certainly to our moments of personal prayer. Our contact with Scripture and the worshipping community of the church provide essential reference points for us in all of it. And we need not think that "religious sources" are the only or exclusive sources for us as we discover what our own conversion means.

In fact, we ought not to overlook the potential of "non-religious" sources to help us discover what conversion means, and to help us discover who God is in our own lives. I think, for example, of some contemporary films and novels as wonderful, rich "founts" of human truth and the discovery even of "religious" meaning.

On the theme of conversion, for example, a scene from *The Accidental Tourist* comes to mind. In the film version of this novel by Anne Tyler, there is a scene in which the lead character explains a major choice he is making in his life. His explanation includes the thought that the choice he is making will result in his "becoming a different sort of person — the sort of person he thinks he *should become*."

We probably do need to do more of this sort of thinking about the choices we make in our lives. We probably do need to ask not just "is this a sin, or does this course of action violate any rules or codes I want to uphold?" We probably need to ask more positively, "Will this course of action help me to become who I want to become?" "Will this activity open me to uncover more about God?" "Will this experience help me to move beyond my present level of relationship with God and myself to a new, deeper level?"

At the end of our lives, we will want to be able to proclaim that we did more than simply avoid sin. We will want also to offer an account of how the choices we have made have helped us to "know, love and serve God" in positive, transforming ways.

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Jesus provides compassion in the face of death

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 14:1-12. (R1) Acts 6:1-7. (R2) 1 Peter 2:4-9.

Perhaps the most consoling words in the Gospel are those in Sunday's reading: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." I have often used this text for a funeral homily.

Our Lord spoke these words the night before he died. The Apostles that night had to face what we all have to face some time or later: the death of a loved one.

Terrible truths, frightening truths, were beginning to dawn upon the Apostles. First, he, Jesus, was going to leave them. They would be like sheep without a shepherd. Secondly, one of their own was going to betray him; they weren't exactly sure who it was. Each asked, "Is it I, Lord?" Thirdly, Peter, their leader, was no help, for he was deeply troubled, because our Lord had told Peter that he would deny him three times before the cock crowed once.

So, they were deeply troubled. Their deepest trouble was the fact the Jesus was going to leave them. Someone they deeply loved was going away. Had they not loved Jesus so much, they would never have experienced so much pain.

No pain is greater than heart trouble, pain springing from love. Love seeks union, communion, with the beloved. Lovers have risked everything so as not to be separated from the one they love. The young Juliet braved the terrors of the tomb to be with her Romeo; Aida,



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

in Verdi's opera, was willing to be buried alive to be with her beloved Rameses; in "Fiddler on the Roof," Hodel went to Siberia to be with her Perchik; Edward VIII gave up the throne of England to be with the woman he loved, Wallace Simpson. Oh, the pain of separation from one dearly loved!

Our Lord did not say, "Don't feel pain." No one can not feel pain at the loss of a loved one. He said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Trouble connotes excessive worry, anxiety, care. Feeling pain — yes! Being troubled — no! And why should we not be troubled, especially over the death of a loved one? Because we should have faith in God and faith in Jesus.

Jesus asked us to have faith in God. Why in God? Because God is a father, our Father. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." Jesus called heaven "our Father's house." Death is

going home. Home means friends, loved ones, rest, no more wandering, like an Odysseus. That was how Robert Louis Stevenson saw death — a going home! Thus he wrote this epitaph for his tomb:

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie;
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This is the verse you engrave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

Secondly, Jesus said, "Have faith in me." In the Gospels there are four funerals: (1) the daughter of Jairus; (2) the son of the widow of Naim; (3) Lazarus; and (4) the burial of Jesus.

Two of these funerals, Jesus stopped short of the cemetery. He raised the daughter of Jairus and the widow of Naim's son because he felt sorry for father and mother. He raised Lazarus because he loved him and his sisters. Finally, he raised himself from the dead to rob death of its sting.

These four accounts show both the compassion of Jesus and his power over death. Thus our faith should breed the hope that death is not the end of life, but the door to a new and better life; that death is simply the blinking of an

eyelid that does not interrupt vision. As the church says in her liturgy: "Vita mutatur, non tollitur" ("Life is changed, not destroyed").

So we call our burial places "cemetaries" — the Latin word for "dormitories." For to Christ and St. Paul, death is but a sleep from which we awake to a far, far better rest than we have ever known and to a far, far better life than we have ever had.

Therefore, "Do not let your hearts be troubled," even in the face of the death of a loved one.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, N.Y.

Daily Readings

Monday, May 6

Acts 14:5-18; John 14:21-26

Tuesday, May 7

Acts 14:19-28; John 14:27-31

Wednesday, May 8

Acts 15:1-6; John 15:1-8

Thursday, May 9

Acts 15:7-21; John 15:9-11

Friday, May 10

Acts 15:22-31; John 15:12-17

Saturday, May 11

Acts 16:1-10; John 15:18-21

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Saturday - 7:30 pm
1- \$200 Jackpot • 1- \$500
Jackpot • 1- \$1000 Jackpot •
Prizes up to \$3000

Special Mother's Day Bingo

Sunday, May 12, 1996 • Doors Open 4:30, Games Start 7:30 • Prizes up to \$2200
JACKPOTS: \$400, \$500 — Over 80 People \$1000 • 2 50/50 Split Pots
3-Face Special \$15.00 9-Face Special \$23.00 18-Face Special \$35.00
Extra 3-Face Specials \$5.00 All Split Pot Specials \$1.00

PLUS... \$5000 Total Prizes

Saturday, May 4, 1996 • Doors Open 4:30, Games Start 7:30 p.m.
4 Split Pots • 2 75%, 2 50%
3-Face Special \$30.00 9-Face Special \$45.00 18-Face Special \$55.00
Extra 3-Face Specials \$5.00 All Split Pot Specials \$1.00

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