

COLUMNISTS

Many believers encounter Christ through action

The British theologian Nicholas Lash has written that he thinks we need to understand the Gospels as "performative documents." By this he does NOT intend that we should perform plays that enact scenes from the Bible! What he suggests is that we should think of the Bible and read it in ways that resemble our approach to Shakespeare or Beethoven: We "perform" them more than simply read them.

Lash invites us to move beyond what he thinks is too often an overly intellectual approach to our faith. He thinks that we should instead be putting more emphasis on living what we believe. Lash thinks that sometimes Christianity has put too much emphasis on the abstract, intellectual propositions that define what we believe, and not enough emphasis on practical concrete living out what we believe. We become preoccupied with right thinking about faith, and neglect "right doing" of faith.

Other theologians, too, have tried to alert us to this same pattern. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who was executed in 1945 for resisting Adolf Hitler, wrote many passages that encourage us to be concerned with doing the Word of God.

"To deal with the Word of Jesus otherwise than by doing it is to wrong him,"



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

Bonhoeffer wrote. "It is to deny the Sermon on the Mount and to say no to his Word. If we start asking questions, posing problems and offering interpretations, we are not doing his Word ... the only proper response to the word which Jesus brings with him from eternity is simply to do it."

A Catholic teacher in Germany, Johann Baptist Metz, wrote: "Every attempt to know (Christ), to understand him is therefore always a journey, a following. It is only by following him that we know whom we are dealing with. Following Christ is not just a subsequent application of the Church's teaching to our life: the practice of following Christ is itself a central part of believing."

Too often we can become focused ex-

clusively on questions about the correct "formulas" expressing what we believe, so that we fail to give attention to the fact that doing our faith is itself a source of deeper believing and greater understanding of what we believe. We want to be "orthodox" in our thinking, but not in our doing.

Jon Sobino, a Latin American theologian, has written that Jesus himself was not as concerned about questions of "orthodoxy" as he was about concretely living his faith.

"Looking at the concrete lifestyle of Jesus, we must first consider the special relationship between right thinking and right doing of our faith," Sobino wrote. "Jesus did not disdain orthodoxy. The problem he faced in life was not that of choosing between an abstract orthodoxy and heresy, but that of choosing between an abstract belief system to be understood, and a concrete doing of faith. For Jesus it was impossible to simply ponder orthodoxy intellectually. It could be made real only through concrete action."

To my knowledge, no one has ever been declared a saint because they got all the propositions of belief right. Saints discover that the process of becoming holy follows upon doing. And for them, the quest for deeper and deeper faith takes

the form of moving quite concretely to new forms of doing, new patterns of behavior, new activities in settings among different sets of people.

For many believers today, the search for deeper faith and greater knowledge of God is leading them to some form of action among the poor and marginalized people in our society. Activity with and on behalf of these people becomes a powerful source of "encounter with God." Through being present to people who are in need, believers gain new insight into how God cares for all of us. Even more than the good they do through activities of this kind, people discover that they come away enriched because they discover something of God, and gain new perspective on believing in God. Doing becomes a way of believing. Both Bonhoeffer and Metz have advised people whose faith is weak to "go do something for someone in need" as a way of strengthening weak faith.

For Nicholas Lash and others, it is probably not as important to ask "Did Jesus really walk on water?" as it is to wonder: "Where can we work together to let Jesus walk on water right here, right now, where we most need him to be?"

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


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