

# COLUMNISTS

## Asceticism is goal-centered

I usually begin Lent hoping that God doesn't have much of a memory. This would assure that my history of "false starts" is forgotten — at least by God!

Ordinarily I begin the season all right. For the few days following Ash Wednesday I'm especially pious, resolved and highly disciplined about the whole thing. Sadly, it usually takes only about a week for me to slacken my efforts and lose much of my original intention.

Of course, I've often been pretty confused about my intentions for Lent. Sometimes I've decided that self-discipline is what it's all about. So I devise a scheme for showing myself that I have great self-discipline. I give up something I really like and is probably not necessary to begin with, or I adopt some practice that should be part of my life anyway. So as I look back over past Lents, I see that I've given up a whole series of "pleasures" at one time or another: potato chips, television, between-meal snacks, coffee breaks during work, salt on my food, gossip, taking the section of newspaper I want ... endless fun stuff abandoned so I could feel good about any self-discipline after six or so weeks of deprivation.

I've gone the other way, too, adopting some practice I should already be doing: exercise, call a lonely person, visit forgotten relatives, write overdue thank-you's,



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

read part of a boring book every day, add some daily prayers, be nice to people I don't like, floss a bunch of times.

At other times I've decided that Lent is about punishment. In these instances I've often been in the grip of some spirituality that has convinced me that God is happiest when we are most miserable so we should like to suffer. So I devise some calculation of atonement that tries to balance a form of self-inflicted penance with sins I've committed, or rules I've broken somewhere along the line.

Whether I'm working out of a self-discipline model or a punishment one, even if I "succeed" at being faithful to my form of asceticism for Lent, I most often end up on Holy Saturday night with a sense of great victory tinged with immense relief that I can at last be done with whatever practice I had embarked upon. It goes

nowhere and leads no place.

In retrospect, I think all this shows that I've displayed a wonderful history of wrongly focused Lents, mostly unsuccessful! In some way my own misdirected intentions have paralleled larger patterns from the history of the church. Not all our efforts have been rooted in the best views of Christian asceticism. In fact we can all benefit from some of the healthier and more authentic options of Christian asceticism. Listening to some of the great spiritual masters from our history we learn that:

\* We all need to focus on our main goal in life: the Kingdom of God. The church retains Lent to help us refocus on our relationship with God and our efforts to prepare the way for the coming of God's Kingdom.

\* We all need to work on keeping in shape for our role as followers of Christ, ambassadors of God in the world. So we need to be disciplined — not so we can feel triumphant and display some foolish perfection or accomplishment five weeks from now, but because we know our goal better and are ready to pursue it with greater energy. Asceticism is a goal-oriented activity.

\* Suppressing our feelings or our bodies is not noble in itself. Christianity is at its worst when it fosters the notion that

feelings, desires and bodies are to be treated with suspicion because they "lead us astray." God created feelings and bodies and informed us that from God's perspective at least, they're good. What Lent can be is a time for refocusing all our feelings, drives and impulses so that even our eating, sleeping and possessions become better instruments of attentiveness to God and the needs of others.

I think taking up special practices in Lent is good for us. We all need to recognize our status as Christians "in training" to conform our lives to the faith we profess. Our willingness to make whatever efforts are necessary to fulfill God's will, whatever the cost, does not come "automatically" but requires considerable exercise and practice.

My own past "failures and mistakes" concerning Lent have most often been related to my failure to remain connected to the real goal of the season, which is to prepare to be better at relationship — with God and others. Asceticism is a goal-centered activity. Whatever practice we take up during this time, let it be for the sake of making us better at this goal which is, after all, the energy at the center of the universe itself.

Sr. Schoelles is the president of St. Bernard's Institute.

## God commands us to love

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 2:13-25. (R1) Exodus 20:1-17. (R2) 1 Corinthians 1:22-25.

A book called *The Ten Commandments* was to be published for the armed services during World War II. The book was too long. So one of the editors quipped, "How about using only five of them?"

So many of us would like to pick out a favorite five and skip the other five. One day when the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, God traveled over the earth seeking those who might follow his law. He met an Arab brigand and asked him if he would follow his commandments.

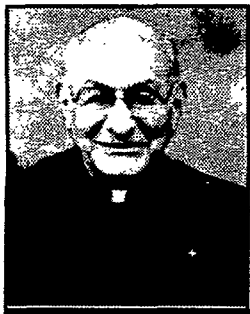
The brigand frowned suspiciously. "Like what, for instance?"

God said, "One is, 'Thou shalt not kill!'"

"You must be mad," the brigand said. "My whole livelihood consists in ambushing camel trains, slaughtering the merchants and confiscating all their goods. A commandment like that would ruin the whole system of private enterprise."

God then went to Babylonia. There, he accosted a merchant and asked, "Would you like to follow my commandments?"

The merchant said, "For example?" God said, "Thou shalt not steal!"



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

The merchant said, "I'm sorry. My livelihood consists in buying cheap and selling dear, in cheating and lying. If I cannot steal, I cannot live."

Discouraged, God went to Egypt. He found an old man there and called to him, "Moses would you like to follow my commandments?"

"How much do they cost?" Moses said.

"Why nothing," God said. "I'm giving them away free."

"In that case," said Moses, "I'll take 10."

The Ten Commandments are at the heart of the great world religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. They are not Ten Suggestions or Ten Recommendations. They are commandments — orders to be followed! The Commandments

are the foundation for civilized behavior.

Eli Herring, an offensive tackle for Brigham Young University, Utah, and a Mormon, turned down a multimillion-dollar deal with the Oakland Raiders because he wouldn't play on Sunday. Yet how many of us do not keep the Sunday holy? The first three Commandments list the duties we owe God; and the last seven, the duties we owe our neighbor. These Ten Commandments are the foundation of civilized behavior. No society can function well when they are ignored.

One of the threats to our nation today is the ignoring of the Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Abortion threatens the infant; and euthanasia, the aged, infirm and handicapped. Our ethical and moral standards are declining among all strata of society. How refreshing it was, tough, to read about David Love III, who back in 1994 called a one-stroke penalty on himself in the Western Open because he couldn't remember if he had moved his ball back to its original spot after having marked it to get it out of another player's putting line. That penalty knocked him out of the tournament. Happily, in 1995 Love qualified for the Masters, finished second and earned \$237,600.

The Ten Commandments are not enough for Christian behavior. They tell us what we are not to do. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he didn't mention any of the Ten. He said, "Love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself."

To the Ten we need to add the two commandments of love.

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

### Daily Readings

- Monday, March 3**  
2 Kings 5:1-15; Luke 4:24-30
- Tuesday, March 4**  
Daniel 3:25,34-43;  
Matthew 18:21-35
- Wednesday, March 5**  
Deuteronomy 4:1,5-9;  
Matthew 5:17-19
- Thursday, March 6**  
Jeremiah 7:23-28; Luke 11:14-23
- Friday, March 7**  
Hosea 14:2-10; Mark 12:28-34
- Saturday, March 8**  
Hosea 6:1-6; Luke 18:9-14

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