

# COLUMNISTS

## We all come to the table as sinners

I taught in a Roman Catholic seminary for seven years. During that time part of my job was to decide, with my faculty colleagues, which of our students should be recommended, or refused, for ordination.

This was always a challenging task, and sometimes a heart-wrenching one. Trying to decide "from the outside" about categories that are very much interior for another individual is a very serious responsibility, and can never be taken lightly.

As I moved through the bulk of material we would be considering about each candidate, and as his eventual ordination moved closer, I got to the point where I looked quite urgently toward just this summarizing question: "But what is most essential here?"

The way I usually answered this query was really quite simple. I thought about the major intention of the sacramental system in our church. It is here that we find what it is we most expect of our priests and pastors — and indeed of the community of the church itself.

The shorthand answer to this seems to me to relate to the Eucharist: Since this person will be our presider at Eucharist, is he a thankful person? Does he exhibit signs of being grateful for the goodness he meets in life? Is he grateful for the goodness he is?



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

Since Eucharist is our banquet of thanksgiving in which we experience and celebrate our reconciliation with one another and with God, does this young man appear to be a reconciling, uniting person? Is he able to help various "factions" understand the other's point of view? Is he welcoming and hospitable to all, able to invite us sinners (which we all are) to the table of forgiveness and reconciliation?

So a key for me in those days became gratitude and reconciliation. Is this someone whose basic attitude and behavior indicate that he will be a "natural" at expressing his own, and our, basic gratitude to God? Is he capable of exercising a reconciling, forgiving presence in the community? Can he foster the kind of hospital-

ity that invites both the best among us and the worst among us to "come back to God with all their heart?"

Since moving on from that seminary job, I have often thought back to these basic criteria as essential not just for those preparing for priesthood, but as the "star qualities" we should be looking for in all our church ministers. And not just our "professional" church employees. I keep thinking that for all members of the church, all followers of Jesus Christ, the keys, if you will, are found in our capacity to be grateful to God (yes, in the midst of both joy and sorrow, of successes and failings), and to be willing to be reconciled with the God who wants us and who died for us "even while we are still sinners."

These two qualities seem in some way to express the heart of what the Christian life is all about. It surely is what our central sacramental system focuses on. This is why I become somewhat puzzled when it seems that we try to put other qualities and characteristics at the heart of what we expect from our pastors, and from members of our church community.

At times, it might appear to outsiders that we think the heart of Eucharist is not reconciliation and thanksgiving at all. Sometimes we seem to treat Eucharist as

some sort of reward for good behavior. And we expect our pastors not to be the ones to echo Jesus' invitation to both sinners and the "righteous" to "take and eat," to "come back to me with all your heart," but to be law enforcement agents keeping from the table those we determine to be sinners (which we all are).

I'm not saying that I think good moral behavior is unimportant, or that our communities don't need moral norms. Of course we do. But what I think are essentially anti-Gospel attitudes are those that would have us violate Jesus' primary injunction to include *everyone* in our communities, to avoid hypocrisy and judgmentalism, to love our neighbor as our self.

What a tragedy for our Christian communities if we ever let the Gospels assume second place to other biblical books or passages. What a tragedy if we expect our pastoral leaders primarily to "enforce rules" and we do not welcome their more essential duty, which is to lead us in offering thanks and praise to God from the midst of the assembly that is all of us — all of us who are always and everywhere reconciling with the God who loves us all.

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

## Who could forget how much Jesus loved us?

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Mark 14:4-15:47. (R1) Isaiah 50:4-7. (R2) Philippians 2:6-11.

It was a festive day in Dallas in 1963. The President of the United States was to parade through the downtown streets. People lined the streets. Children waved flags. Cheers rang out as the President drove slowly by in his convertible.

But all was not right. The motorcade turned toward the Book Depository. A rifle emerged from a fifth-floor window. Kennedy's limo comes into view. The assassin finds the back of the president's head in the cross hairs. He fires. Pandemonium breaks out and a country's favorite son is finished.

Word had spread that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. The city was astir. Not only was this famous prophet coming but it was also Passover. Every adult male Jew who lived within 20 miles of the city had to come for the Passover. Pilgrims from every corner of the world were there too.

So it was no accident that Jesus selected this time to be in Jerusalem. The peo-



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

ple welcomed him. They cried out with Hosannas to Jesus. They greeted him as they would greet a pilgrim, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

But all was not right. Jealousy swept through the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They met, coaxed others to join them and plotted the demise of the man who had the courage to confront their hypocritical lives.

Palm Sunday turned into Good Friday. They had him stripped naked, he was flogged, spat on, struck in the face, garlanded with thorns and then they shed his

blood on a cross.

A mother and her young daughter were driving to the zoo during Lent. On their way, the little girl began counting out loud the crosses on various church steeples.

"Mom," she suddenly asked, "how many times did Jesus die?"

"One time, dear," her mother said.

"Then why are there so many crosses?"

"To help us remember how much Jesus loved us," her mother replied. "He died on a cross for love of us."

"Well," the child responded, "how could we forget something like THAT?"

The Jewish historian Josephus witnessed hundreds of men dying on crosses during the siege of Jerusalem. He called crucifixion "the most wretched of deaths." St. Paul did not exaggerate when he called the crucified Jesus "a stumbling block to the Jews" and "foolishness" to the Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23).

Yet Jesus was willing to embrace this extreme dishonor, this excruciating pain, and shed his blood to reconcile us to his father, to save us from eternal death.

I asked Jesus, "How much do you love me?"

And Jesus said, "This much —" and he stretched out his arms and died.

Who could possibly forget that?

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

### Daily Readings

**Monday, March 24**

Isaiah 42:1-7; John 12:1-11

**Tuesday, March 25**

Isaiah 49:1-6; John 13:21-33, 36-38

**Wednesday, March 26**

Isaiah 50:4-9; Matthew 26:14-25

**Thursday, March 27**

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14;

1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-15

**Friday, March 28**

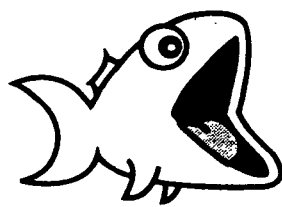
Isaiah 52:13-53, 12;

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19

**Saturday, March 29**

Readings as in Lectionary

## Lenten Dining Guide



Come to Mama Rosa's for Fish Fry During Lent

Early Bird Fish Fry, 4-6pm \$5.95

Hours:

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Fri. & Sat. 4-9:30, Sun. 4-8

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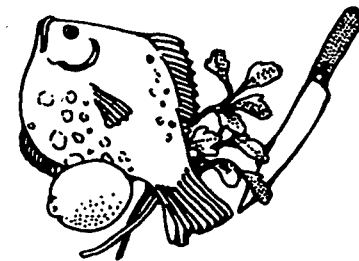
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