

# COLUMNISTS

## We are called to increase freedom

As we move through the wonderful rituals of Holy Week and Easter and renew our contact with the power of symbols like light and water and oil, as we hear again the remarkable stories of the death and resurrection of Jesus, I find myself drawn each year to consider something of "the big questions" of human existence.

This year my thoughts centered on God's will and God's activity in history. I suppose this line of thought is provoked by a re-reading of the crucifixion story, filled as it is with such unforgettable images of human cruelty, indifference and failure to assume responsibility. It relates too to the validation of Jesus' mission by God made visible for us in his resurrection.

The contrast between events as we move from the terror and abandonment of Holy Thursday night to the acceptance and endorsement of Jesus by God on Easter presents us with the vivid reminder that much of what happens in the world is opposed to God's will for humankind. Wherever our cruelty, rejection, indifference and self-seeking lead to the diminishment of other human beings, God's will is not being done. But wherever human freedom is enhanced, wherever we manage to promote genuine human flourishing for ourselves and others, we can be sure that there



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

God's will for the world and for history is underway.

Today all Christian theology is learning a great deal from liberation theologies. Some of what we learn helps us appreciate the meaning of what we commemorate in the movement from Jesus' crucifixion to his resurrection. Much of this relates to a renewed emphasis on human freedom. According to a main thesis of liberation theology, God takes human freedom very seriously — far more seriously than we do ourselves. In fact, God limits God's own freedom in the world out of respect for our freedom. God's will for the world is that human beings become more and more free all through their lives.

This means that we are called by God to assume responsibility for our own growth

and for the events of the world. In fact, proper development of individuals — development in accord with God's will — is that we grow toward greater inner responsibility ourselves, and that we become agents of increasing freedom for others, too. This means that our activities on behalf of others and all our actions in the world, will be directed at creating conditions that will mean greater freedom for all. We will work to put an end to anything that shackles, constrains, or inhibits the exercise of inner freedom for others.

In this view, God's action in history does not occur *in place of* human activity, as if God steps in directly and accomplishes what needs doing apart from us. Instead, this view holds that God's activity in the world is God's *presence to our* human activity. God's will is for the good of all human beings, for the increase of freedom for all. Those who do God's will work to create the conditions that will enable others to overcome their lack of freedom.

Already I'm in trouble here, of course, because the word "free" has so many different interpretations. Human freedom in terms of being unfettered by responsibility, or being without commitments or obligations, is not what I mean. Theologies of liberation take "freedom" to mean

something like "the acceptance of inner responsibility for the my own history and the section of human history that I can influence to help bring everything into relation with the Kingdom of God."

God does not act in place of human activity. Otherwise God would surely have saved Jesus from the crucifixion. God acts through God's *presence to our* activity. God does not magically "undo" the evil we perpetrate or the sufferings we undergo. God's will is that the movements of our personal histories and of human history itself contribute to the coming of God's kingdom. God's will is that our exercises of human willing and deciding and accomplishment, both personally and socially, nationally and internationally, will contribute to the growth in freedom of all God's people.

That's what salvation is and that's what the resurrection of Jesus endorsed. To see what it looks like in the concrete, study the life stories of Jesus and the saints, and look at the "experts" of human freedom in your own life. There is no shortage of witnesses to what "freedom on behalf of God's kingdom" looks like.

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

## God's love helps cast out fear

"Love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). On the Sundays of the Easter season, the second reading is taken from the First Letter of St. John. In that letter, John describes God's love for us and invites us to walk in love. And yet we warn one another repeatedly that it's a dangerous world out there. We are afraid of street crime, drugs, international terrorists, post-communist risks of invasion and nuclear attack, and, most recently, collision with an asteroid.

At least some of the danger is of our own making. We've exported weapons without much scrutiny of the buyers, recruited narcotics dealers as informants, and replaced educational opportunities with in-jail schooling — by other inmates.

But equally disturbing is how we scare ourselves for entertainment's sake. Safe in a house with triple deadbolts, we read horror novels and watch commercials for burglar alarm systems. We titillate ourselves with television's feature terror-dramas and enjoy the adrenaline rush brought on by the news. We forget that most of the



ordinary time

BY MARY ANN MCGIVERN, SL

evening's fears were fictions we indulged in for pleasure. Thus we develop the habit of being afraid, tingling with stimulated fear, yet safe in the knowledge that we are secure in a locked house or car or office, miles from any high crime area.

Preoccupied with that adrenaline rush, we miss the tragic ironies of real life. Last month in St. Louis, two teenagers were accused of robbing a bank and killing a guard along the St. Patrick's Day parade route where the city police were marching. Maybe the suspects were too dumb or too

desperate to develop a better plan. Of course they were caught quickly. Now the police think the teens were imitating a cops-and-robbers movie. The prosecutor may ask for the death penalty. Then the people who pay to have the movies tingle their spines will feel the thrill of vengeance for free. But these are children we are threatening with Death Row, children copying what they saw in the movies.

The violence in the world is evil. If those two kids killed a man, their crime is grievous. But I fear that the reporting offers more excitement than grief to casual readers and TV viewers.

"Love casts out fear." This Easter message must be practiced by willing hearts that choose to love. It is up to us to reject fear and substitute habitual acts of love. If we do the corporal works of mercy — care for the sick, feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned — then when a politician tells us to be afraid of asteroids and invest in military protection, we'll recommend instead that the money be spent to care for those

we love: the homeless and prisoners. When a prosecutor calls for the death penalty, we'll urge mercy. When a politician requests money to build new prisons, we'll ask if the poor have been fed.

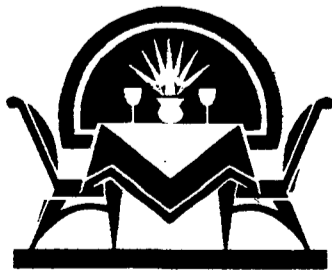
Acts of love lift our hearts, while fears burden us. Easter joy is the realization of "how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). When we express our joy in deeds of love, we walk on a dangerous path with Jesus, risking crucifixion but putting our faith in resurrection. Joy doesn't get the adrenaline going the way fear does. It may not give us warm feelings. Joy even coexists with sorrow and suffering.

Fear is a popular commodity these days. Love is less well-marketed. As the body of Christ, it is up to us to cast out fear by carrying Christ's love into the community.

Sister McGivern is executive director of the St. Louis Economic Conversion Project based in St. Louis, Mo.

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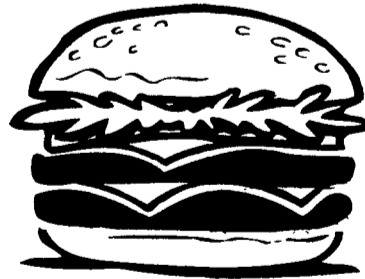
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