

# COLUMNISTS

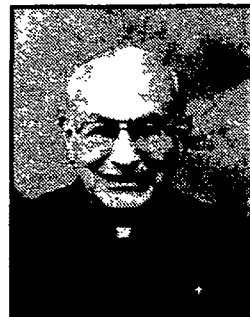
## The cross prevails in triumph

**Feast of the Holy Cross:** (R3) John 3:13-17. (R1) Numbers 21:4-9. (R2) Philippians 2:6-11.

Sunday we celebrate the feast of the Holy Cross. The early Christians venerated the cross of Christ. For instance, their favorite position for prayer was with arms outstretched, like the figure of Christ on the cross. The custom of praying in this position lasted through the Middle Ages, especially in Ireland, and was retained in the liturgy with the priest standing in this position for the more sacred prayers of the Mass.

The probable date for the finding of the true cross is Sept. 14. Legend has it that it was found by St. Helena on her journey to the Holy Land in 326. Her son Constantine the Great built two basilicas in 335 over the sites of the Resurrection and the Crucifixion. However, the feast of the dedication of these two basilicas was gradually forgotten as the veneration of the true cross became the chief attraction.

Devotion to the true cross increased in 623 when the Emperor Heraclius recovered it from the Persians, who had carried it off in 614. According to the story, the emperor determined to carry the precious relic on his own shoulders into Jerusalem with the utmost pomp. But at the entrance to the holy places, he found that he was not able to move one step forward. The patriarch Zachary, who walked



a word  
for  
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SILAMON

by the emperor's side, suggested that his imperial splendor was hardly in keeping with the humble way that Jesus had carried the cross. So the emperor laid aside his crown, put on simple clothes and bared his feet, then he was able to carry the cross into the city.

The key words in the liturgy for this feast are "lifted up." The Gospel is part of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus alludes to the first reading when Israelites were in the desert and bitten by fiery serpents. Moses made a bronze serpent, lifted it up on a pole, and all who looked at it were healed of their snake bites. "Lifted up" for John had a triple meaning: crucifixion, Jesus lifted up on the cross; resurrection, Jesus lifted up from the tomb; and ascension, Jesus lifted up to heaven. Jesus' lifting up was one continuous movement of exaltation.

Jesus' allusion to the bronze serpent

referred to an incident in the 40-years wandering in the desert of God's people. The people had complained against Moses and God so often that as a punishment God sent snakes, called seraph snakes because their sting burned and caused death.

When the people repented, God ordered Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up on a tent pole. Serpent cult was common among the Canaanites at that time. The serpent was associated with healing just like the two serpents entwined on the staff of the Greek god Askelepios — a symbol still used today by the medical profession. But here, the healing was done by God. This incident serves as background to the Gospel in which Jesus says, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of Man be lifted up" — to heal the sting of sin inflicted by the infernal serpent.

The second reading is a beautiful hymn from Paul's letter to the Philippians. It is a wonderful statement of both the incarnation of Jesus (God emptying himself and taking the form of a slave) and his paschal mystery (his death, resurrection and ascension).

The passage is constructed like an hourglass: beginning with Christ's divine origin, narrowing to the point of his death, and then expanding with the proclamation of his glory and culminat-

ing in the statement of his identity as Lord.

This same reading was used on Passion Sunday. There, the focus was on Jesus' humiliation through his crucifixion. Here, the emphasis is on his exaltation through his resurrection from the dead. The feast this Sunday celebrates the triumph of the cross. We adore thee, O Christ, and we praise thee, because by thy holy cross thou hast redeemed the world.

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

### Daily Readings

**Monday, September 15**

Hebrews 5:7-9; John 19:25-27  
or Luke 2:33-35

**Tuesday, September 16**

1 Timothy 3:1-13; Luke 7:11-17

**Wednesday, September 17**

1 Timothy 3:14-16;  
Luke 7:31-35

**Thursday, September 18**

1 Timothy 4:12-16;  
Luke 7:36-50

**Friday, September 19**

1 Timothy 6:2-12; Luke 8:1-3

**Saturday, September 20**

1 Timothy 6:13-16; Luke 8:4-15

## Temperance transcends selfish interests

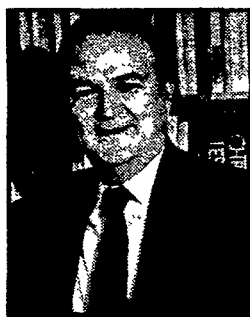
Perhaps no virtue has been misinterpreted more often than that of temperance. A proper understanding of the virtue depends upon an appreciation for some of the central doctrinal principles of the Catholic tradition: creation's goodness, redemption's decisive and irreversible effects, the Holy Spirit's abiding presence and healing power.

Temperance has to do with the so-called concupiscent appetites, that is, our inherent desire to achieve satisfaction through food, drink, or sexual relationships. It is a virtue that enables us to derive the fullest measure of satisfaction from each without going to excesses that are harmful to ourselves and to others.

Unlike the pagan philosophers, who regarded these appetites as ugly and brutish forces that need to be curbed by reason, the early Christian writers saw the human appetites as essentially good, because they come from the creative hand of God for the good of individuals and of humankind itself.

The struggles related to this virtue are a way of participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Death to self leads to a fuller life in the Holy Spirit.

St. Thomas Aquinas insisted that the virtue of temperance does not seek to repress our human appetites but rather to "temper" them to serve human growth.



essays in  
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By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Temperance, therefore, is a positive, not a negative, virtue. It does not deny the goodness of the pleasures derived from food, drink and sexual intimacy. It humanizes them.

Aquinas referred to three "subjective parts" or divisions of the virtue: (1) abstinence, which humanizes our desire for food; (2) sobriety, which humanizes our desire for intoxicating drink; and (3) chastity, which humanizes our desire for sexual pleasure in accordance with our state in life.

Each of these appetites, when properly satisfied, contributes to the preservation and fulfillment of the individual and of the human species itself. The vice of intemperance makes these pleasures ends in themselves and brings harm to the individual and to others as well.

It is intemperance that leads one to use

food, drink or sexual intimacy as crutches or escapes from human and Christian responsibilities. Their misuse may be symptomatic of a fundamental disorder of the soul.

Not everyone who is excessively heavy, therefore, can be said to have a healthier appetite for food than others. To be sure, there may be chemical or psychological disorders that afflict the overweight person. But the condition, in some cases at least, may also be a sign of a spiritual disorder, manifested in the sin of gluttony.

Those who are frequently intoxicated to the point where they cannot function are not necessarily persons who have a refined taste for liquor. Although excessive drinking may be due to alcoholism, it may also be an expression of seriously irresponsible behavior, known as the sin of drunkenness. It is a particularly grave sin when it endangers others, as in the case of one who drives under the influence.

Finally, those who move from one sexual liaison to another without commitment do not do so because of uncontrollable, overflowing love. Although there are addictions in this area, in most cases such behavior is morally irresponsible.

Nevertheless, the Catholic tradition insists that these pleasurable human activities are essentially good in themselves.

We eat and drink not simply to satisfy

hunger and thirst. Eating and drinking are human and humanizing activities. They are means of socializing and building community. For the Christian, the Eucharist itself is the primary case in point.

Similarly, we enter into relationships that may lead eventually to sexual intimacy. But we do so not simply to perpetuate the human race. Sexual intimacy is also a human and humanizing activity. It is a sacrament of a couple's mutual love. Under certain conditions, it may also involve a participation in God's creative activity.

Our ascetical efforts to "temper" our appetites for food, drink and sexual pleasure are genuinely Christian if those efforts acknowledge the essential goodness of these appetites and of the pleasures that satisfy them, and, moreover, if those efforts turn us not in upon ourselves but outward, in concern for others.

Every virtue, temperance included, is but a "power" to transcend our own selfish interests and to turn our energies to the service of others.

Much like Jesus himself, who had to remind even his disciples that he had come "not ... to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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