

## Celebrate by seeking reconciliation

I once took a theology course called "Reconciliation." I'll admit that I took it only because a friend of mine had already signed up, and I thought it would be easier to arrange rides. So much for academic interest and theological significance. What I didn't realize at the time was that this course would be dealing with the very central mystery of the Christian faith.

During the first class of the course, the professor began introducing words that held the same meaning as reconciliation. He gave each member of the class one word to research and report on. "Salvation," "liberation," "grace," "sacrifice," "atonement," "repentance," "forgiveness," "redemption" and "peace" were all assigned. Beginning with the very next class, we spent the rest of the term dissecting the meaning of reconciliation from the perspectives of all these associated concepts.

Each one of those words comes at this single mystery from a different angle and highlights a particular facet of the mystery. For example, I learned that "atonement" is a unique term, since it originated in the Anglo-Saxon culture. Some accounts maintain that it is the only English word whose origin does not come to us from another language system. The



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

origins of "atonement" are entirely in the English language. It designates "at-one-ment." The word originated from our need to express what happens when two estranged parties reunite. They come back together. They get back to being "at-one." They reconcile. The enmity between them is put to rest. They are made one again.

Like each of the other synonyms of reconciliation, atonement points out that there is a role for both parties as they work to come back together and form a new relationship that can overcome the breach that has separated them. There is a price to be paid by both, even in cases where the separating offense appears to be entirely one-sided. Even pure forgiveness requires a pledge of some change by the forgiving party, as well as

the one who may be clearly in the wrong.

Christmas is many things. Among these, and perhaps above all of them, it is a sign of reconciliation between God and humanity. As Paul writes, it was "while we were yet sinners" (Rom. 5:8) that God deigned to come among us. In Jesus, God sought to overcome the barriers that human beings erect between themselves and God. In Jesus, God invites us into a new, repaired relationship. Instead of demanding that we do all the changing by ourselves, even though we are clearly the offending party, God created the possibility for a new relationship. It was God who was willing to initiate the first step in forming the new relationship — in the person of Jesus.

By attempting to bridge the gap with creation gone awry, God enacts the dynamics of reconciliation. Someone has to take the first step beyond estrangement and create the possibility for the establishment of a new, right relationship. As we know from the events of Jesus' life; that step is likely to be costly — for both parties.

We will all celebrate Christmas in many ways. Shopping, trees, decorating, visits, meals, fellowship and friendship are all part of it. We probably pay extra attention to the readings at Mass during

these Advent weeks, and make special efforts to participate in Christmas liturgies with family and friends. As we do all these things, and as we begin to look back on a year nearly finished, we might spend a few minutes reflecting on the meaning of reconciliation, depicted through the many familiar and lovely symbols of the Christmas stories.

This feast day of the Prince of Peace is unique in its ability to let us know that "God first loved us" and initiated the process of moving beyond hurt to create the conditions in which a new, now-made-right relationship is possible. It might be a fitting celebration of this holiday to move beyond the barriers we have erected, and try to create the conditions in which reconciliation with someone who may have offended us are possible; or to seek forgiveness (at-one-ment) with those we have offended. I once heard a quip proclaiming that "the tragedy is not that things get broken ... it is that they don't get fixed."

Reconciliation is, in so many ways, redemption for us. Maybe we should try it. That really would make for a "Merry Christmas."

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



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### Kids Chronicle ANSWERS:

1. h, 2. c, 3. a, 4. d,
5. b, 6. g, 7. f, 8. e

### Catholic Connection



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