

COLUMNISTS

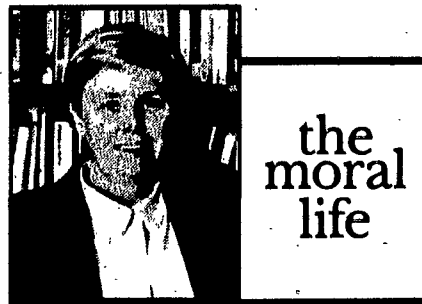
New Year's resolutions attempt 'quick fix'

I notice that for the first half of my life I was very involved in a fervent practice of making New Year's resolutions. I used to pledge all sorts of behavior corrections, and for a few years, anyway, I actually modified some of my less noble practices, at least for a while.

But over the second half of my life, I think I've taken a more skeptical view of the whole New Year's event; having noticed that I rarely kept any of the resolutions I made, I've given up the practice altogether. This lack of resolve may represent a kind of slide into mediocrity, of course. But it might also represent a kind of wisdom that has been available to the greatest moral traditions for centuries. The wisest geniuses of the moral life seem to have been critical of the phenomenon of "instant moral change."

I don't want to say that instant moral change never happens, or that individuals with more will power than I have can't benefit from practices akin to the New Year's resolution. But if we listen to some of the great moral minds from history, I think we find a different model of behavior modification that is more realistic.

Aristotle, for example, wrote that "If you want to know the good, and become



BY PATRICIA SCHOEFFELS, SSJ

good yourself, you should watch what good people do, do likewise, and then gradually you will become good and come to know the good." I like that very much, particularly because Aristotle recognizes that becoming sensitive to goodness is not a onetime event or decision. It's a process that evolves gradually, over time.

Aristotle's statement also assumes that our moral conversions are not rooted in abstract principles so much as they are rooted in the concrete example of others. He tells us that to become good, we need the example of good people in our lives so that we can imitate them. Still, he recognizes that simply doing good deeds does not immediately produce a good person. Through acts of imitating good

people around us, we create the conditions for the possibility of goodness for ourselves. But actually becoming good requires repeating the good actions over and over again, so that they become patterns and habits in us, come to form us, shape our consciousness and eventually become almost "automatic" for us.

From Aristotle's perspective, I suppose a reasonable New Year's resolution might be to try to "hang out with better people" who would stimulate our moral imaginations, showing us what goodness looks like and offering us a model for imitation. But Aristotle would never expect a onetime resolution to immediately take root in our lives.

There is a piece of wisdom from the Buddhist tradition that is like this. Buddhism has a strong component advising those who take up the quest for a better moral life to seek a "companion" or "guide" as one seeks to change for the better.

In addition, in some stories from that great moral tradition, the Buddha is said to have instructed his disciples that if they wanted to correct a behavior that dissatisfied them, they should not embark on immediate changes. Rather, he advised them to watch the behavior in question

over the course of several weeks, in order to understand it.

If you have a hunch, for example, that your conversation is becoming little more than gossip, the Buddha might instruct you to pay attention over the course of several weeks to what it is you talk about when you are with others. Only after this process of observing our own patterns of speech and gaining greater understanding and insight about it can we undertake the activity of modification. The Buddha also recognized that the process of reform would be gradual and would happen only over the course of time.

For both Aristotle and the Buddha, then, moral change is a gradual process. Each advised a series of actions involving understanding as well as action. Interesting, too, is the notion that for both some deliberate interaction with others is necessary for moral goodness. These two would surely have questioned our practice of New Year's resolutions, which look for quick fixes and a false kind of isolation and independence from our communities.

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

Baptism remains only a beginning

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 3:13-17. (R1) Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7. Acts 10:34-38.

The feast of the Christmas Baptism of the Lord ends the cycle of Sundays in Ordinary Time. With the exception of Lent and the period from Easter to Pentecost, this series of Sundays in Ordinary Time will continue unbroken until next Advent.

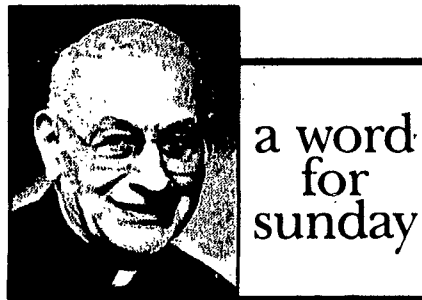
The Christmas Season revealed that Jesus is Lord and Messiah. The baptism of the Lord reveals his mission.

Our Lord's baptism posed problems for the early Christians. "Why," they asked, "did Jesus go to John to be baptized, if he were greater than John and if he had no sins to repent of?"

Matthew tried to solve the problem by showing that John himself protested against baptizing Jesus and that it was Jesus himself who insisted on his doing this, as his Father wanted it this way.

"Allow it now," Jesus told John, "for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Note that Jesus united John with himself: "It is fitting for us" — us, you and me. "To fulfill" a prophecy. At Jesus' baptism the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled, for the voice from heaven quotes the prophecy of Isaiah: "This is my beloved



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

Son, with whom I am well pleased." The entire prophecy says that Jesus is the servant, the chosen one, spoken of by the prophet, who would not break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick. Rather he would fulfill all righteousness; that is, by his life and death, he would make it possible for all men to become right with God.

So Jesus' baptism was both a revelation and an inauguration.

It was a revelation that Jesus is God's beloved Son, his chosen servant. In another of Isaiah's servant songs, he makes it clear that this servant of God would be a suffering servant, led like a lamb to the slaughter. The Jews expected a political messiah, a military genius like David, who would crush the Romans.

John knew better. So on the very next

day after Jesus' baptism, John pointed him out: "Look, there is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." As the blood of the lamb redeemed Israel from Egyptian slavery, so the blood of the true lamb of God would take away the sin of the world enslaving mankind.

Secondly, Jesus' baptism was an inauguration — the formal beginning of his work of salvation. By submitting to baptism, Jesus had identified himself with sinners. By identifying with sinners, he assumed all the consequences of sin. Right after his baptism, he was tempted by the devil — the beginning of fierce temptations that would assail him the rest of his public life, even to the cross.

So it is with us. Baptism makes us sons of God. But that, too, is only a beginning — of a life of trials and temptations. Sirach said, "When you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials" (2:1).

The great temptation of the devil after Jesus' baptism was to persuade him to take the easy way out. Change stones to bread, jump down from the temple top. The great temptation that often plagues us is to run away from the cross, to take the easy way out.

How many, for instance, have left the church not because the doctrine of the Trinity is too hard to grasp, but because

sexual morality is too tough to follow; not because the Eucharist is too much a mystery, but because confession is too hard; not because the pope is too authoritarian, but because the moral law is too demanding. In other words, the problem is moral, not dogmatic; practical, not intellectual, not one of believing, but one of living the faith.

Because our faith is so demanding, the Holy Spirit is given us also at our baptism. All we need do is pray to him and we too shall conquer.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, January 11

Hebrews 1:1-6; Mark 1:14-20

Tuesday, January 12

Hebrews 2:5-12; Mark 1:21-28

Wednesday, January 13

Hebrews 2:14-18; Mark 1:29-39

Thursday, January 14

Hebrews 3:7-14; Mark 1:40-45

Friday, January 15

Hebrews 4:1-5, 11; Mark 2:1-12

Saturday, January 16

Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 2:13-17

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