

COLUMNISTS

Look to believers to understand beliefs

There are probably many different explanations about how our convictions "work" in our lives. Some explanations treat religious truths somewhat like truth functions in a computer. In these schemes religious convictions become a kind of exam by which we can test whether or not we are orthodox in our belief. "Do you believe in God?" works like a kind of test — if you answer "yes," you pass. If you answer "no," you flunk. This sort of explanation puts emphasis on the institutional uses of religious convictions.

There is an explanation that I like better than this, though. It is offered by the theologian James William McClendon in two books he has written, *Biography as Theology*, and *Understanding Religious Convictions*. McClendon urges us to understand the tenets of our belief in terms of their meaning for the way we live more than the way we think. He maintains that the main function of religious convictions is their influence on our actions, our choices and the patterns of life we take up.

For McClendon, religious convictions give rise to our living "a certain kind of life." He says that if we honestly want to know what we believe, or if we want to understand what a particular group or religious denomination believes, we should



the
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life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

study concrete lives, and not the texts of the creeds they profess. He urges us to consider the biographies of individual believers to uncover what religious belief really means.

In his writings, McClendon actually outlines a method by which he tries to investigate selected lives of individuals, and offers guidelines for inquiring into the lives of members of various religious groups. He insists that the Christian tradition can be understood more by looking at biographies of Christian believers than at theology textbooks or catechisms, formulas for rituals, contents of creeds and professions, or official documents and teachings.

Moving through Lent and entering the month of March can be a particularly suitable time to reflect a bit on McClendon's "take" on this matter. During this time of

year we publicly commemorate the lives of a number of our more famous saints. St. Patrick and St. Joseph come to mind immediately. But in March we also honor the Polish St. Casimir on March 4, the great women saints and martyrs Perpetua and Felicity on March 7 and St. Frances of Rome, a married woman who raised three sons before founding a new religious order, on March 9.

In McClendon's scheme, the tradition begun in Jesus continues not primarily in the verbal and written teachings promoted by the church, but in the lives of those who follow him. In fact, McClendon insists that "the Jesus tradition" needs always to be re-presented for us in contemporary terms. Thus our belief in the communion of saints, and our use of the calendar of saints throughout the liturgical year is not simply a secondary side show to the "really important" parts of our religion. It is absolutely central for our knowing what Christianity is truly about.

Ideally, our parishes and religious congregations can function for us in ways similar to the calendar of saints. We all need concrete examples of what Christianity looks like in the flesh today. The stories of Jesus in the four Gospel accounts offer us the ultimate paradigm of this. But the lives of our fellow believers

re-present for us how Jesus' life and teachings continue in the real life situations faced today. As we look around our own faith community, we should be able to point to individuals whose words and actions, whose life style and patterns portray for us what the Gospel looks like in the USA. today. These people become sort of living sermons inspiring us to make the Gospel concrete in our lives, too.

One of the great features of Catholicism has been our reverence for the communion of saints. We stress the fact that we are united not only with those now living, but with those who have already died, too. Their lives and example continue to inform us, and we remain united with them in helpful ways even beyond the grave.

According to news accounts, Pope John Paul II has waived the five-year wait requirement in the process of possibly naming Mother Teresa a saint. This move undoubtedly reflects the pope's pastoral understanding of the need we all have for examples who can inspire us and show us at least one picture of what a Gospel-centered life can look like in the situations of modern life.

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



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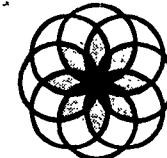
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