

COLUMNISTS

Answered prayers not limited to the 'deserving'

When I have time, I love to read about sports. In particular, I enjoy the rhetoric often associated with sports heroes. It often exhibits more than a few parallels with religious language. At times sports commentators seem to verge even on "schmaltz," as they nearly deify good players, as they attribute divine intervention to games won and plays well made, as angelic music accompanies TV coverage of major contests in any number of sports.

When I'm serious, however, and not wanting to poke fun at these pseudo-religious traits of sports reporting, I read Bob Costas. In my opinion he's the smartest, most articulate and certainly the most reasonable of all the commentators. In fact, I'd take him way ahead of most political and other commentators dealing with life's "more serious" issues. I was understandably happy, then, to discover an article in *Sports Illustrated* praising Costas and quoting him on a topic relating to religion and prayer.

Costas was quoted in connection with a comment made by one NFL quarterback who claimed that his team had won because "it was filled with devout Christians." This comment made Costas mad, apparently, and he remarked: "I understand the mystery of faith, but it's a strange God indeed that would answer prayers for a free throw and not the prayers of a sick child."

I appreciate this comment very much. Not only does it challenge some of the rhetoric surrounding sports, but it rais-



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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

es some important theological questions that we've probably all wondered about at some time or other. Sooner or later, we all wonder about the theological foundations for our "prayers of petition" — asking God for this or that favor or result.

On the one hand, I marvel that we keep doing it, since lots of what I ask for, at least, doesn't happen. I've been disappointed in both significant and insignificant matters. Just last week, when I left my office late for a meeting and was scrambling to get there, I prayed that there wouldn't be much traffic at the light I needed to "make." When I got there, things couldn't have been worse! Despite the fact that I didn't get what I wanted, I went right ahead and asked for something else about 10 seconds later. For some reason I don't seem to be discouraged by the fact that many of my requests are refused!

On the other hand, I keep thinking that my requests must sound pretty silly to God, who witnesses such enormous

suffering and misery all over this planet. Why on earth would even my more serious issues seem important against the background of such anguish? Furthermore, I question what good it does to raise any of these issues before God, who is supposed to know what we want and need already. Finally, I often think it unfair that God would respond more favorably to those causes that elicit better or more prayers.

I can't imagine that I'm the only one who ponders questions like this about prayer. So I was happy to see Bob Costas raising a pretty profound theological issue.

On the question of prayers of petition, of course, the tradition does have some wisdom to offer. For one thing, our fundamental belief in God is belief in a particular kind of God. Christians believe in a caring God who desires what is for human good. That is a huge sentence. A second theological aspect of this question is the fact that human beings live in a state of dependency on God. This fact can seem obscured at times to those of us living in the mainstream culture of the United States, I suppose, since we have learned to control so much of the world around us to bring about the effects we desire. Our general sense of self-sufficiency can make it seem that we simply are not dependent on anything beyond our immediate capacities. Still, a profound sense of human life is that of being "out of control" within ourselves and over the world around us. This sense translates into a need to express our de-

pendency on God, which we do through prayers of petition.

A third element from our tradition that can be of help in this regard is simply the recognition that when we pray, we do not seek to put God under our control or "manipulate" God so that what we want gets done. The mystery of God exceeds any and all accomplishments of ours, and the prayers we raise must be deeper than specific requests we make. Praying for what we need invites us above all to put ourselves and our needs, our entire situation, in God's hands — not to try to orchestrate results or "manage" the distribution of grace around us.

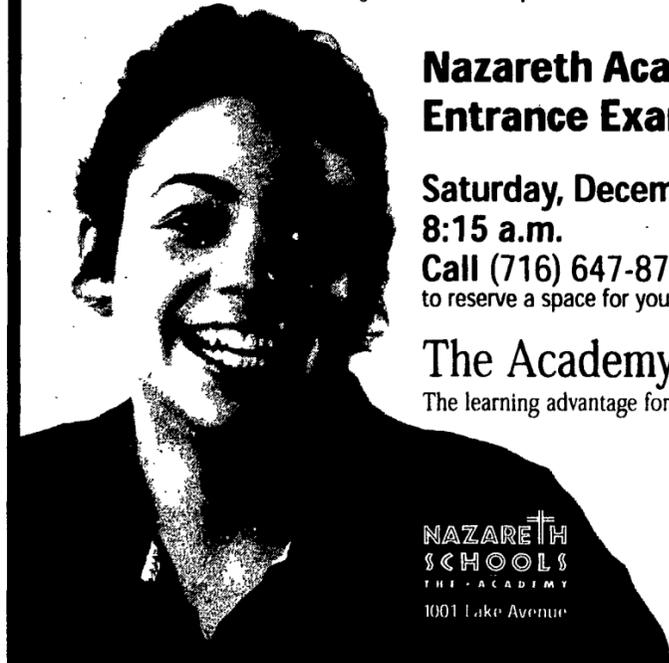
I don't blame Bob Costas for being mad at that quarterback's comment. I think God acts independently of any goodness we think has earned us "merit" and quite apart from any prayers we may say. I don't think questions about the efficacy of our prayers are futile, or that we can avoid asking them sometimes. But most especially, I think it is a very good thing to go on asking for what we need with confidence, in spite of not "getting results," and continuing to witness enormous evil in the world. The mystery into which we are invited, after all, involves a Savior who called God "Abba," and offered us an image of God so intimately involved in our lives that the very hairs on our head are numbered.

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

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