

COLUMNISTS

View God as friend, not fate-maker

Whew! This is the last column that I have to write this century. What a relief.

Having said that, I wonder whether much will actually change in the transition from Dec. 31 to Jan. 1. A few people I know are busy storing up water and other supplies in case the grocery industry falters because of Y2K. Some people I work with are making elaborate plans to be up and "on the job" come Jan. 1, trouble-shooting for anticipated computer failures that will keep us all from our usual level of high efficiency performance during the whole next week or so. Absolutely nobody I know plans to travel by air anywhere around the first of the year. Great tension everywhere I look.

Reading a little history, however, assures me that we are not very far removed from our ancestors of a thousand years ago. At the turn of that millennium, people were apparently similarly distressed. Halley's Comet had flown through a few years before, and people were wildly distressed and anticipating cataclysmic catastrophe as the century and millennium ended. They didn't have computers, but apparently they too felt



By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

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very dependent on forces to sustain their lives, but which they feared might utterly betray them at any time. Maybe that's part of the human condition: We fear change, we can't really trust the world around us, we feel "out of control" about our very lives, we construct symbolic turning points and wait for them to bring us either prosperity or disaster.

The end of a year or a century or a millennium gives us a focus for these universal and very basic feelings, and becomes for us a very big deal. Sometimes we even bring God into the mix, casting God as some kind of capricious mischief-maker causing all sorts of bad things to

happen. We imagine that God is as unpredictable as other powers surrounding us. And we start to see ourselves living puppet-like lives, driven this way and that by the hand of fate and a God who is so strange that we can do little more than wait for troublesome developments to unfold so that we can test our endurance or fearfully submit to "the powers that be." As a result of this sort of theological move on our parts, our relationship with God becomes unlike and even inferior to our other relationships. Instead of acting with God to bring about our own growth and make things better, we assume a passive role that calls us to little more than submitting to life's blows.

I think there are better ways to envision God, and these can help us to be more positive about the future as well. Instead of seeing God as a tyrant fate-maker, Thomas Aquinas would have us relating to God in the terms of human friendship. Instead of relating to God as distant "play maker" in the sky, Thomas encourages us to develop a growing partnership with God. In one grand sentence, Thomas says: "Charity signifies

not only the love of God, but also a certain friendship with God."

For example, we do not expect our friends to play "dirty tricks" on us to see how we will make out "when the chips are down." What we expect from our friends is that they will stay with us, even when we are in some of our less attractive growth stages, they will assist us in growing as human beings, they will encourage us to become freer and more responsible as we move forward in life, they will bring into our lives welcome and enjoyable companionship that enriches everything we do.

I think a good New Year's resolution might be to try to work on our relationship with God in terms that are more like a maturing friendship and less like submission to a semi-beneficent tyrant who is only slightly more trustworthy than (we hope) our Y2K compatible computers! I'll bet we'll face the future more confidently — even if all our computers crash — if we can make this kind of move.

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



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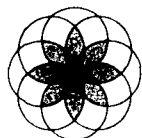
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