

COLUMNISTS

When would Jesus celebrate Easter?

An acronym has become popular in recent years, especially among evangelical Christians: WWJD ("What would Jesus do?"). It emphasizes the responsibility of Christians to respond in a Christ-like manner to every situation they encounter — in private life, in business and professional life or in politics.

The WWJD syndrome bothers many people, especially non-Christians, because it seems to them a formula not so much for putting Christian faith into practice, as for imposing one particular version of Christian faith on others.

There is another side to the WWJD formula. It is brought out in a joke that began making the rounds in the 1960s.

At a gathering of local clergy following a Confirmation ceremony, a priest in one group tells of a situation he recently faced while distributing Holy Communion. He looked up and saw someone he knew to be Protestant moving steadily up the line. The priest became very nervous and wondered what he should do.

As the person drew closer, the priest thought to himself, "What would Jesus do?" The bishop, sitting nearby with another group of priests, turned and exclaimed, "You didn't do that, did you?"

The joke always got a laugh, especially with post-Vatican II audiences, because people recognized in the punch-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

line the situation the council had created for the church. Catholics, including priests, no longer could rely upon rules and regulations as the final word. They had to face each problem as it arose, addressing it primarily in the light of the Gospel rather than church law.

It is this other side of the WWJD formula that shapes our somewhat elliptical reflections this week about Easter — not about the rich faith content of the feast, but about the controversy in the early church over the dating of Easter.

On the one side were a number of local churches in Asia Minor which celebrated Easter when the Jews observed Passover, namely, on the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan, regardless of the day of the week it fell on.

Because they insisted on that date, these Christians were known as Quar-

todecimans (Latin for "fourteenth").

On the other side were most of the churches of the West, which celebrated the feast on the Sunday following the Jewish Passover. (For a long while Rome itself did not even have a separate feast for Easter. It regarded every Sunday as the feast of the Resurrection.)

Now what would Jesus make of this controversy?

He would be pleased to learn that both practices were tolerated, in the beginning at least, and that Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of John the Apostle, was warmly received when he came to Rome around the year 155 to try to persuade Pope Anicetus (155-66) to adopt the Quartodeciman practice.

Even though the pope did not accept the recommendation, he invited Polycarp to preside at the Eucharist, and the two parted company in peace.

Taking the WWJD formula as our guide, Jesus would smile approvingly. The dating of Easter is a minor matter. Why fight over it?

Subsequently, the Roman church adopted the custom of celebrating Easter as a separate feast — on the Sunday following Passover.

A later pope, Victor I (189-98), was not content to allow both practices to coexist. He demanded that the Quartodeci-

mans in Asia Minor conform to what had now become the Roman practice.

When Polycrates, the bishop of Ephesus, refused to bend to the pope's will, the pope excommunicated him. (WWJD? He shakes his head.) Many Christians reacted strongly against the pope's action, even those who followed the Roman practice.

Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the great bishops of the time, chastised the pope, reminding him that all previous popes had tolerated the Quartodeciman practice and that the issue did not touch the essence of the faith. (WWJD? He says to himself, "Good for you, Irenaeus.")

After the Council of Nicaea endorsed the Roman practice in 325, many of the Quartodecimans broke communion with the church, and the schism lasted for more than two centuries.

WWJD? He would offer these words of advice to his church. When controversies erupt over matters that do not pertain to the essence of the faith (and most do not), follow the path of Irenaeus rather than Victor.

"Yes, I know Victor was a pope. But my advice stands."

Happy Easter to all.

...
Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Jesus' death, resurrection bring new life

Easter Sunday (April 23): (R3) John 20:1-9. (R1) Acts 10:34, 37-43. (R2) Colossians 3:1-4.

When Margaret Thatcher was prime minister of Britain, a terrorist's bomb exploded in a room where government meetings were held. Thatcher survived but some cabinet members were killed.

In church the following Sunday, the Iron Lady wept at the loss of her friends. She would not only miss them, but also the wonderful times they had together. Undoubtedly the grief of Mary Magdalene on that first Easter morning was even deeper than Margaret Thatcher's.

The followers of Jesus on that first Easter morn were emotionally and spiritually dead. They had no vision. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb of Jesus, not in anticipation of his resurrection, but to complete his burial. Like Maggie Thatcher after the death of her friends, Mary was crushed. Her closest friend, her mentor, her Lord was dead!

Marius, in the musical, "Les Miserables," sings after his friends have been killed in an ill-fated student rebellion:

"There's a grief that can't be spoken/There's a pain goes on and on/Empty chairs at empty tables/Now my friends are dead and gone."



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

Such was the pain of the followers of Jesus after his crucifixion. On Easter afternoon on the road to Emmaus, two of Jesus' disciples spoke of their dashed hopes by saying, "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Notice the past tense. They had hoped. Hope unrequited is a cruel emotion. They had hoped, but hoped no more. Hope died when Jesus died; thus their depression.

The good news of Easter is that it does not end with women anointing a lifeless body. It does not end with disillusioned disciples retreating into their houses. Nor should Easter end with our giving up the search for joy and purpose. Easter ends with Mary testifying to her frightened and discouraged friends, "I have seen the Lord." Easter ends with

the disciples opening their eyes to Jesus as he breaks bread with them. And, if we keep the faith, Easter can mean more to us than chocolate bunnies and ham dinners. It can mean new life.

Jesus' resurrection is a positive answer to the question that a tortured man of faith named Job had raised centuries earlier. Just like the disciples, Job's world had come crashing down. He lost his property, his health and even his family. In his pain he asked a question he could not answer, "If a person dies, can he live again?" The resurrection of Jesus is the answer to Job's question. A person can rise from the dead.

Death is merely another event in the ongoing process of life — something one lives through with Christ. The resurrection of Jesus reinforces Scripture: "The souls of the just are in the hands of God and no torment shall touch them ... they are at peace" (Wisdom 3:1).

When George Bush was vice-president of the United States, he represented our country at the funeral of Leonid Brezhnev. There were no prayers, no comforting hymns, and no mention of God. When Mrs. Brezhnev came forward for her final good-bye, Bush related, she walked up, took one last look at her hus-

band, and traced the design of the cross on his chest. "In that single act," said Bush, "God had broken through the core of the Communist system."

God still breaks through the cores of systems that enslave. The stones of hatred and oppression, violence and genocide, despair and futility are still rolled away. And heaven breaks out in its own Hallelujah Chorus: "And He shall reign forever and ever!"

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

Daily Readings

Monday, April 24
Acts 2:14, 22-33; Matthew 28:8-15
Tuesday, April 25
Acts 2:36-41; John 20:11-18
Wednesday, April 26
Acts 3:1-10; Luke 24:13-35
Thursday, April 27
Acts 3:11-26; Luke 24:35-48
Friday, April 28
Acts 4:1-12; John 21:1-14
Saturday, April 29
Acts 4:13-21; Mark 16:9-15



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