COLUMNISTS

A week to think about the suffering

the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

Several years ago I had the opportunity to study the works of two German theologians, both of whom reflected at length on the reality of the suffering and death of Jesus. One of them, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was actually in prison while producing some of the most important theology of the 20th century. Ordinarily we do not expect impressive theological thoughts to come to us by way of prison. However, Bonhoeffer's letters have become a source of several theological movements that followed him.

In one particularly memorable passage included as a Prologue to an edition of his published letters, Bonhoeffer wrote "There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer." This passage continues to intrigue and inspire many readers of Bonhoeffer and seems to be a fitting passage for reflection during Holy Week.

These words suggest that there is more than one way to view the events of life on this planet. There is most obviously the viewpoint available to most of us reading this newspaper: the viewpoint of those who enjoy many of the good things of life. Included among these would be the means to secure employment, to provide for ourselves and our children, political freedom, a way to carry out our sense of responsibility, the respect of our neighbors and colleagues, communities that provide us with a sense of being worthwhile and valuable, with a place of belonging and some degree of rewarding companionship.

For most of his life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer enjoyed these things too. For the last two years of his life, though, he was a prisoner of the Third Reich. Looking back, many conclude him to be a hero, since his imprisonment was the result of his taking up action against National Socialism. At the time, however, he was simply a prison inmate. His mother, for example, wrote at one point that her life was made the more difficult because of the "disgrace" associated with his being in prison. She had to face that reality as the mother of a prisoner. Bonhoeffer himself had to struggle with his own self-perception as he took on the identity of a social outcast.

One of the ways this experience affected him was his new ability to see the world from "below." He thought this experience gave him a truer way to understand the life of Jesus, particularly the events surrounding his death.

Several years after Bonhoeffer, another German theologian took up this notion and extended the idea of seeing the world from below and applied it in new ways to the church. Johannes Metz thought of the church in terms of its being a "table and story-telling community" charged especially with the mission of keeping alive the memory of the suffering of Jesus. For Metz, Jesus' suffering is God's own participation in the general suffering of humankind. Like Jesus, so many who suffer now and who have suffered in the past have had to endure their torment because of the actions of other human beings. Metz thinks that as we tell and retell the account of Jesus' suffering, we should connect his suffering with the misery of others who suffer at the "bottom rung" of humanity.

Metz writes: "Jesus challenged our domination over one another when he identified himself with unreserved love with those who were being oppressed. His loving identification with the insignificant, rejected and oppressed expressed God's sovereignty and was an act of liberation."

In another passage he says: "We Christians live out of the memory of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we believe in him, we remember the testament of his love. In his love, God came into the world as an act challenging human domination of others ... Our memory of Jesus constantly forces us to break through the dominant ideas of our age and to look at things that hide from us the fact that oppression and injustice are all around us."
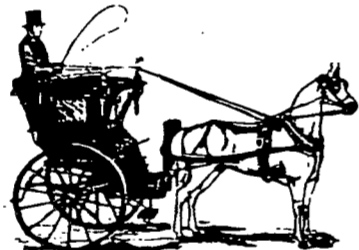
Because Christians are tied to the memory of Jesus as a suffering one, himself a prisoner and one executed by the authorities of his time, Metz thinks that our churches should be institutions that take up the cause of the forgotten ones in society. Churches should help all of us to try to see the world "from below" so that we move from experiencing the story of Jesus in church to taking up action in defense of those whom our various political and economic systems allow us to "discard" and forget.

As we enter into the final days of Lent 2000, particularly as we also commemorate this Jubilee year, we might take a few minutes to extend our awareness of Jesus' death, to let it awaken in us a sense that there are others who suffer in these same ways today. Such a connection might help us to move from telling the story of Jesus' suffering to being a part of relieving the suffering of others in need of our help. Letting the liturgical events of Holy Week help us to see the world "from below" is surely part of why we enter into these important days of faith.

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