

## COLUMNISTS

## The importance of acknowledging sin

I'm continuing to focus on individual parts of the Mass in order to draw out some ways in which each points to and exemplifies aspects of the moral life. This week I've selected the rite of reconciliation that occurs near the beginning of the liturgy. The beginning of the Christian life is marked by the call to repent. In the New Testament, Jesus' opened his ministry with the words: "The time has come and the reign of God is near; repent and believe the good news." Interior conversion and turning ourselves away from sinfulness and toward God is a central part of what we need to be about as Christians.

Repentance is rooted in God's promises of forgiveness and mercy. It is also rooted in awareness of the depth of human sinfulness. Over the course of the history of Israel and Christianity there have been many rituals developed to express and mediate the event of repentance in the believer's life. Catholics are aware particularly of the sacraments of baptism and reconciliation as relating to the church's call for continual reconciliation of one's life with God. As we know, each time we gather for Eucharist, we express our need for repentance right away.

I've always thought that Catholics have a paradoxical relationship with sin and sinfulness. On the one hand, we have a rather optimistic view of humankind. Underlying much of our theology and practice is the assumption that human beings are fundamentally good. This means that we assume that human beings are capable of doing good things, of



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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

knowing truth, of understanding the ways of God. Other Christian denominations accuse us of being too optimistic and of underestimating the pervasiveness and depth of sinfulness.

Perhaps it is this overly optimistic view of our capacity for good that makes us so miserable about our sinful side. It may be what gives the phrase "Catholic guilt" its bite. The other side of optimism about how good we can be is utter shame about how bad we actually are.

I also think that for many of us older Catholics the form of the sacrament of reconciliation that we grew up with has contributed to our often exaggerated sense of shame and guilt. The dark and secluded confessional itself, with the necessary assurance of complete confidentiality about our sins, has had the unexpected result of contributing to a sense of secrecy and disgrace about sin. In an ironic sense, we seem to assume that perfection is actually possible. We may even consider it an expectation, and dismiss others when they exhibit moral failings. We may even come to think that our own

sinful dispositions and acts, the vices against which we struggle, or the harmful traits that we have picked up along the way render us "unredeemable," as if our own moral goodness and not God's action in Christ is the source of our salvation.

I think the acknowledgement of our sinfulness and request for forgiveness that takes place at every eucharistic liturgy helps to correct some of this and helps to move us to a better appreciation of human sinfulness. Just the fact that we do this so regularly should help us to appreciate that sin is part of ordinary life. Not a week goes by that we don't engage in some form of sinfulness. The fact that we do engage in this ritual publicly ought to reinforce the sense that we're not the only one who struggles with a "shadow side" — every Christian does! The fact that we engage in the ritual as a church should remind us that even believers commit sin. We ought not be disillusioned at the sinfulness either of ourselves or of others. We ought not to put one another on pedestals or rend our garments when we discover faults and failures in one another — even in the best among us. To quote Martin Luther, all Christians experience themselves to be "saved and sinful" at one and the same time.

At the very outset of every liturgy we express awareness of our sinfulness, and we express our intention to try to do better in the week ahead. We repent: together, in daylight, publicly, all of us, as a church, as the church. Sinfulness is a part of life. It is part of the struggle of each of us individ-

ually and it is part of the struggle of all communities, organizations, institutions, clubs and families that we will ever belong to. We struggle against sin, but we do not escape it. We can do better than to treat it as a "disgrace" that needs "hiding" and that is not part of the very fabric of the church.

I often think that we can take a lesson for all our church gatherings and efforts from this aspect of the liturgy. In Eucharist, first we gather, and then we repent. I often wonder whether church documents and pronouncements would be read more and appreciated better if they assumed this same structure. What if every church document acknowledged, right at the beginning, that we have, as a church, "failed" in the matter at hand. What if right away we let it be known that we really haven't been perfect in the matter at hand, but that we intend to try improve things in the future.

In this connection, I think of the letter from the U.S. bishops on the economy. Acknowledgement that we have all misused our wealth and that we can do better in the future would strengthen that document, I think. Or the letter on "Human Life in our Day": acknowledgement right away that we have all failed to value human life appropriately would help to situate that letter, too. God has saved us "while we are yet sinners." This, and not our own "perfection," is the true source of our joy.

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## Discovery reveals sacrificial basis of circumcision

Q. Why is circumcision mentioned so often in the Bible, and why was it so important for the Jews? Jewish men had to be circumcised, and the Gospels say that even Jesus was. How did this practice get started? (Ohio)

A. Not long ago I would have had to say no one knows the answer. Perhaps this is still true, but some archeological discoveries in recent decades point to a possible explanation.

Circumcision, it seems, may be closely related to human sacrifice, which was widespread in some ancient Mideast cultures (including, at certain periods, the Jews) as a way of placating and supplicating the gods.

Several years ago archeologists in the Near East discovered an interesting document apparently written by a Phoenician priest.

The text tells how a god named El, to prevent destruction of his city, sacrificed



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corner

By FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

his son to his father, a god named Heaven. El then circumcised himself, and commanded all his followers to be circumcised, thus saving their home.

In this tradition, at least, circumcision seems to take the place of human sacrifice. A part of the body is substituted for the whole. Since an intimate relationship was seen between individuals and the entire community or tribe, circumcision, involving part of the male organ of procre-

ation, proclaimed that the whole nation, the whole clan, present and future, was consecrated to the god it worshipped.

In this context, it is easier to see why the descendants of Abraham came to view circumcision as a fitting and necessary expression of their covenant with the God of Israel.

Q. Someone in our parish has been distributing a leaflet that tells us receiving Communion in our hands is wrong and against God's will. Most of the ideas I have no trouble dealing with, but one statement puzzles me.

She claims Mother Teresa once stated that one of the greatest harms to the church was the start of Communion in the hand, and that she believed it is wrong and should never be done. When did Mother Teresa say that? (Pennsylvania)

A. That rumor has been in circulation for at least 15 years that I know of. I have

no idea how it started, but as with all such rumors, the people who spread it do not hesitate to keep it going.

For years I was deluged with letters urging me to tell people how Mother Teresa felt. I had strong suspicions about the claim. But at last, not long before her death, I contacted the officials of her community in India about it, describing what she was quoted as saying.

Their response informed me that Mother Teresa never said anything like that. In fact, they added, receiving Communion in the hand is not forbidden even for her own sisters.

As I indicated, it isn't likely, from my experience, that this fact will hinder those who are determined to keep the rumor circulating.

(Questions may be sent to Father Dietzen at Box 325, Peoria, IL 61651, or e-mail: jidietzen@aol.com.)

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