

COLUMNISTS

When we pray, our audience is God

This week I'm continuing this short series considering the moral implications that might follow from the aspects of worship that are part of the eucharistic celebration. Today I'm focusing on the prayer. After we gather and participate in the opening rites, including the ritual of reconciliation, we pray. In the missal I used growing up, this prayer was called the "collect." I always thought that must mean the prayers of the whole congregation were "collected" together at that point and directed to God.

I'm not sure whether that interpretation has much validity, but I am sure that this is an important moment in the liturgy. We greet each other, we acknowledge that we have sinned and that we stand in need of reconciliation, and then we pray. We open our hearts and minds to God. We direct our attention away from ourselves, our ordinary concerns, our usual distractions, our customary responsibilities and refer to God. We pray.

We know, of course, that prayer can take many forms. Sometimes we ask God for what we need, sometimes we praise and thank God for the good things we have received, sometimes we simply open ourselves to God's presence and goodness. The prayer of lament has received attention recently, and seems now to characterize some of our moments of prayer. By this we refer to the conversations with God that are actually "com-



the
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life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

plaining" or expressing anger — even at God! This mode of prayer is found in many of the Psalms, and seems particularly appropriate when we are faced with suffering or the situations of great suffering. Some theologians writing from the perspective of the Third World advocate this form of prayer for everyone, in view of the fact that such enormous suffering is present today for the majority of our planet's inhabitants. It is no secret that two-thirds of those alive today live in sub-human misery and deprivation. This fact, in the face of our worship of a good God who cares for all of us, seems to invoke this kind of "prayer of lament." Even Jesus apparently used this prayer shortly before his death, when he complained: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

For me today, however, with my task being to try to uncover moral implications that flow from the actions we un-

dertake at Mass, I am thinking of a rather peculiar phrase. It asks the question: "What audience are you playing to?"

Living our lives in the complex society of today means that we all belong to multiple communities, and each one of these makes particular demands on us. At work, we need to do what the boss wants, appeal to our colleagues and associates, maintain the standards of our professions and jobs. At home, our spouse has needs and demands, our children make constant — and mostly justified — claims on us, we have to be accountable for our financial responsibilities, we have to find a balance in terms of household chores and family relationships.

Our parents, our social lives, our out-of-town associations all make claims on us. We need to make sure we've worn the right outfit for the right occasion, that our appearance meets the expectations of the occasion at hand.

We have to be sure that we're on time for our appointments, that our umbrella is handy if it rains, that we aren't neglecting our dental care or our fitness needs.

Surely we face many audiences every day of our lives. It is obvious that we have a great number of people to whom we must appeal, and to whom we are accountable. We clearly have many duties, sometimes even conflicting ones. We have multiple sources of the many demands we face and the countless re-

sponsibilities that comprise our lives.

But at the beginning of each Eucharist, we join together, acknowledging that we really are pretty weak and flawed people, and we pray to God. We "raise our minds and hearts to God," reminding ourselves again that the real "audience" before whom we are living our lives is God. Praying obviously involves words. When he "taught us to pray" Jesus used words (though perhaps fewer than we might have expected, and less "exceptional" ones that we might have awaited). Praying involves a special kind of attention (to the God who is both absent and presence, whom we both know and don't know).

But in looking at our moral lives, it is no small thing just to remind ourselves that praying involves the reminder that the ultimate one to whom we appeal and for whom we live is God. Our true and ultimate audience is the God of the Universe who creates us, and redeems us and sanctifies us. We have many responsibilities to many people, but we do ourselves a grave injustice if we overlook the fact that there is an ultimate and most important focus for all we do. The ultimate source of meaning, the ultimate focus of direction for our lives is the God we worship at every Eucharist.

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