

COLUMNISTS

Important symbolism in Holy Saturday

We are focused now on coming week when we will celebrate again the central mystery of our faith, called the paschal mystery. From Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday we will commemorate, as we do each year, the passion and death of Jesus. The great events of Jesus' passing over from life to death to the new life of resurrection all play out in this short time frame. His last supper, garden agony, arrest, trial and betrayal, his death penalty, crucifixion, death, burial and rising are all commemorated during the period from Thursday to Sunday.

According to my framework, this unique weekend takes a distinct turn from bad to good. Somehow in faith, these two directions are to be held together. We travel from the absolute worst that can happen to the absolute triumph that our God has guaranteed for us in Christ Jesus. From death, to life. From shame and horror, to triumph and glory. Our task as Christians is to hold the two together.

Of all these four days, the one that is sometimes most perplexing is Saturday. The other days all seem to have a clear purpose. Thursday is the Last Supper, and for us Eucharist. Friday is the Crucifixion and Death. Sunday is Glory and Resurrection. But what about Saturday?

Of the entire liturgical year, this is the one day when nothing goes on. There is no Mass, no confessions, no weddings, no gatherings of any kind. What seems to occupy most parishes is trying to set up the church for Easter. There needs to



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

be a transition from the starkness of Lent, with all its austere barrenness, to the glory of Easter. All those lilies need to be positioned. The water and fire, symbols of the new life, need to be arranged. The Easter Vigil, central liturgical celebration of the whole year, needs to be choreographed. On Saturday, nothing is going on.

Still, from several vantage points, Saturday is really important. Saturday is the one day when Jesus is dead. This is the day when the ultimate human loss is also the ultimate divine loss. Just as in the human scheme of things the most horrible experience is death, Jesus has gone through that, too. Just as in the human scheme of things shame and confusion, weakness and disgrace are our main afflictions, Jesus has gone through that, too. On Saturday the church rests in the reality that Jesus is there, too. Instead of moving immediately from Friday to Sunday, the church lets Saturday happen. There are several important messages that can be derived from this.

One might be that the Resurrection resulting from death requires time. It isn't an immediate outcome, but it takes time. The journey from sickness to health, from sin to forgiveness, from division to reconciliation, from dying to rising, is not immediate but requires time. That's what Saturday represents. The time it takes to get from Friday to Sunday is important commemorative time because it symbolizes the time it takes us to heal, to forgive, to reconcile, to rise from death. These things don't happen instantly. We can't force or control them. They aren't automatic. They require time.

Saturday also shows us the depth and reality of Jesus' misery. He really was "lost" — to us, to himself, to God. He really was dead. Gone. Died. Over with. His project really had resulted in failure. All his friends deserted him, all his visions met with opposition, all his aspirations backfired. He was tried and convicted. He was the worst of prisoners, the lowest of all of society's losers, the one sentenced to death. He felt pain, rejection, betrayal, the scorn of his enemies, the loss of his friends and those he loved. Whatever the bad things we can go through, he went through. On Holy Saturday, we symbolically relive all of that.

But things don't end on Saturday, either. Sunday dawns, and the new life of Resurrection is reality, too. Resurrection, of course, isn't just restoration, like restoring what used to be. It isn't just mending something broken so that it will

be as good as it was before. It isn't just resuscitating the corpse and making it come back to its former state. Resurrection indicates something altogether different, something we can't understand and didn't imagine in the first place.

The absolute newness of resurrection is implied by the stories of Jesus as he reappears to the disciples after his death. They don't recognize him. They don't know him. While they were great friends of his and knew him well before, they can't tell who he is after the resurrection. That's how different resurrected life is from our life. That's how different the promises of God are from the ways we realize them now. That's how utterly new life after death is. That's how different God is from what we are.

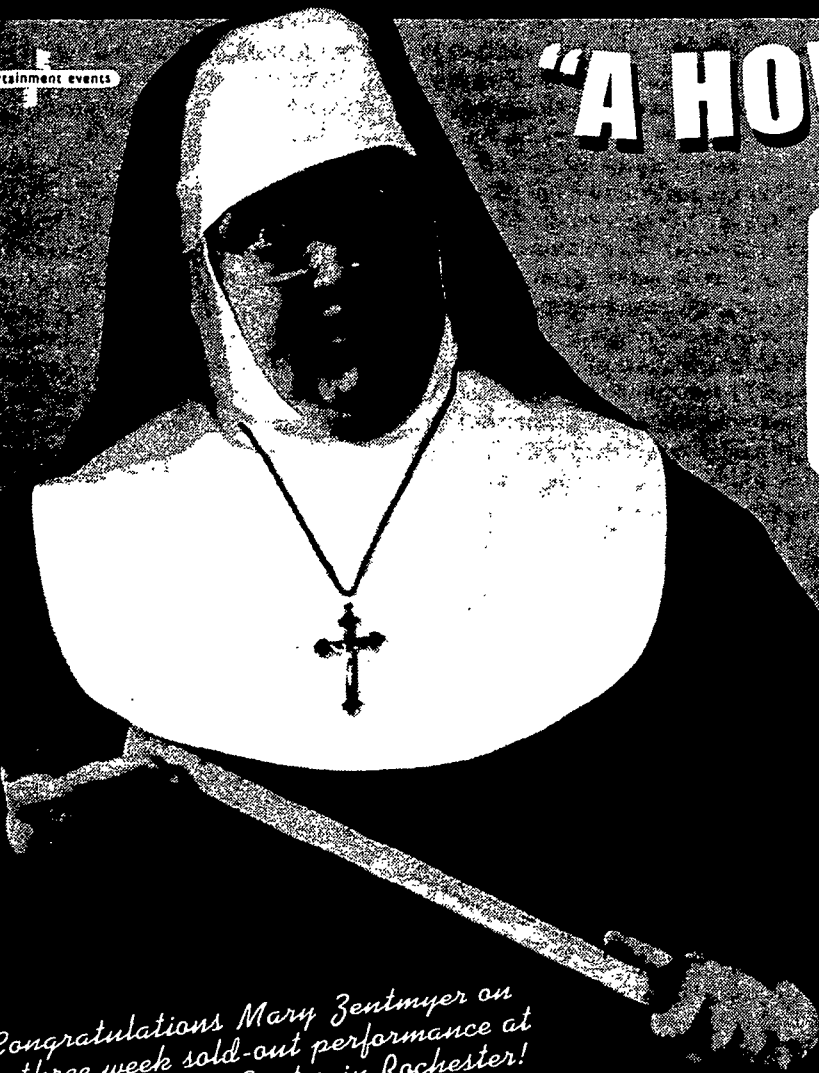
Holy Saturday is a day not to be overlooked. It helps us appreciate how resurrection really does answer life's ills. It helps us appreciate how real Jesus' suffering was, and how real God's love is. It helps us understand that the paschal mystery, the dying and rising of Jesus, is not imposed on human life from outside, but in fact emerges from the very thread that makes up the central drama of human life. Saturday reminds us that it takes time. Saturday reminds us that the end result will be something entirely new, not a restoration of the status quo. Saturday reminds us that God surpasses everything we have come to expect.

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

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