

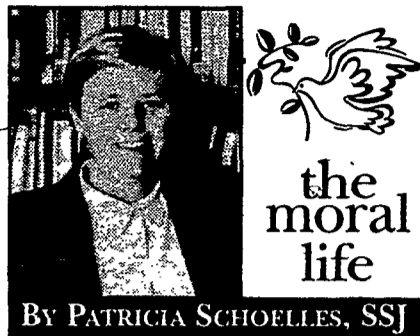
COLUMNISTS

More than ever, we'll celebrate presence

I for one am happy to have this year end. While the beginning of the new millennium seemed to herald new times and great promise, Sept. 11 put the end to that. People tell me that now we in the United States are no different from people living elsewhere: We no longer feel secure from the political and religious violence that has affected so many parts of the globe for so long. No matter what our direct connection to the victims of the tragedies of that day, we are all different now, and some of the hope we held for the new century is gone.

For some, these events have led to a new depth of thought about life. This sort of experience is likely to affect the way we celebrate this holiday season. More than ever we might echo Lance Armstrong's book title, *It's Not About the Bike*. More than ever, it's not about the presents. It's about the presence.

Maybe that means that we are taking more time now to be together with those we cherish. Maybe it means that when we are together, we are more attentive to one another. Maybe it means we've taken steps, unconsciously or consciously, to rid our lives of false obligations we feel, or habits that have us more off-track than on-track. I'm convinced that in some way, for all of us, this holiday sea-



By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

son will be different because of 9-11.

It might mean that our celebration of Jesus' life in this season will hold greater clarity, too. There is a great deal about "presence" in the whole idea of the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus. Immanuel means "God with us." The whole celebration and every aspect of it refers us to the Christian belief that God is with us.

I've always had a sense that life is pretty great whether someone is religious or not. Water, for example, is a great substance even before the church takes some of it and designates it as "holy water." The goodness of humanity, even without being consciously recognized as "in Christ," is awesome in itself.

But those of us practicing the Christian faith recognize this other, even more

profound aspect of life. God is with us. In tabernacles, in Eucharist, in the person of the priest, in one another. In sunsets and seascapes and woodlands and cool breezes and busy days and slow days and loneliness and joy. God is with us.

Good times, bad times, sinful times, times of loss and confusion, boredom or hope. God is with us. Nothing we can do or experience can shake God. Even in death, God is with us. Even while we are sinners, God is with us. As our nation struggles to recover from disaster, to execute justice against terrorists, to minimize our own brutality and sense of revenge, God is with us. Dare we say even that God is with those our forces now are hunting down in the mountains and caves of Afghanistan?

God's presence infuses every minute of our lives and makes every one of them sacred. Little minutes and great events are all sacred, because of the presence of God. This "biggest idea" of Christmas has the glory of being made known to us in the details of the stories of Christmas. We read these over and over each year without any sense of being trapped into a network "repeat." They give us the account of God's coming in terms very familiar to many of us, and even more to others living on our planet.

The broad strokes of the stories include many mundane minutes, some very familiar to us, others more well-known to other parts of the world. They're paying their taxes, they didn't get a room, they have to move (to Egypt) to secure a safer life for their child. They're hunted by an unjust and selfish ruler. They have trouble with an uncle (Zechariah), forget to get a crib, have to care for a relative (Elizabeth), and, through odd luck and timing, end up spending Christmas with a pretty odd collection of people — like shepherds!

As we consider the great privilege of a Christian life, lived in the presence of God, we might also use the details of the stories to remember those for whom God is also present: those burdened by poverty and oppression; refugees without a home or a country; those struggling to care for elderly or sick family members; those who want to give their children more; those whose work, while being undervalued and terribly hard, brings us the food we need to live.

This year it will be easier, I think, to keep focused on what we really do mean by presence.

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

Christmas story is surprise after surprise

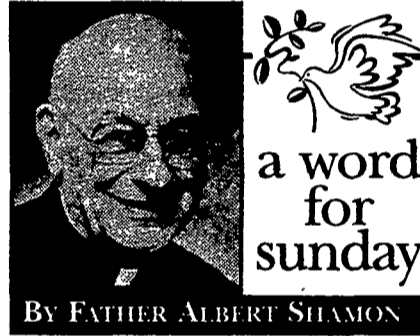
In France expectant mothers are often greeted with the comment, "I congratulate you on your hope."

If any mother deserved that salutation, certainly Mary, the Mother of Jesus, did. The child she carried in her womb is the hope of the whole world.

When Joseph, Mary's husband, found her with child, he decided to divorce her quietly. No doubt he knew her conception had to be something extraordinary for he believed sincerely in Mary's holiness. But the fact that he was not the father seemed to leave him no alternative but to divorce her quietly.

Mary could have told Joseph the true story. But she trusted in God and left all things in his hands. And rightly so, for God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream, and the angel told him that it was through the Holy Spirit that Mary had conceived. Joseph believed and took Mary into his home as his wife.

Joseph was caught between what God said and what common sense said. But he believed God! Likewise, in this Christmas season we, too, should believe that God knows us and cares about us; that we are not alone in the world. Like Joseph we, too, must follow God's will for our lives even though at times it



By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

might not seem to make sense to us.

Mary's story of being chosen by God and being "with child" by the Holy Spirit must have been the most unheard of thing anyone could have ever conceived. Why would God choose an obscure village maiden to bear the Messiah? Wasn't the Messiah supposed to be a warrior-king, a conquering hero? Where does a baby fit into all this? What other religion has its god give up his status to become weak and vulnerable, like any other human being? No other god but Jesus Christ claims to love us so much as to empty himself and become one of us.

Joseph no doubt must have been surprised that the Messiah would be born under such circumstances. With us, too, the Christmas message is always a sur-

prise.

We are surprised to realize where Jesus came from. He was born in such an obscure place. Why Bethlehem? At the time of Christ only about 300 people lived in Bethlehem. Still, it was a busy place, a stopover for travelers headed for Egypt. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Micah predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, also the birthplace of Israel's greatest king, David. Still, such an obscure place!

Then, too, we are surprised to realize who Jesus came for. He came for everyone — for the rich and the poor alike. He came as the child of a girl from a little town in Galilee and was thought to be the son of a carpenter. He came for all those people who think no one really knows their name, for all who have no one to fall back on, for all who feel they are just nobodies in life.

Finally, we are surprised at Christmas to realize why Jesus came. He came not to lead his people into battle against Rome. Not to reign in power and might. Not to set up a kingdom by force. He came to lead us in battle against the forces of sin and death. He came to set up an eternal kingdom of justice and righteousness. Jesus came to save us

from our sins, not by power or force, but by humbling himself and coming as one of us to where we are.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, December 24
2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16; Psalms 89:2-5, 27, 29; Luke 1:67-79

Tuesday, December 25
Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalms 98:1-6; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18 or 1:1-5, 9-14

Wednesday, December 26
Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59; Psalms 31:3CD-4, 6, 8AB, 16BC-17; Matthew 10:17-22

Thursday, December 27
1 John 1:1-4; Psalms 97:1-2, 5-6, 11-12; John 20:2-8

Friday, December 28
1 John 1:5-2:2; Psalms 124:2-5, 7B-8; Matthew 2:13-18

Saturday, December 29
1 John 2:3-11; Psalms 96:1-3, 5B-6; Luke 2:22-35

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