

COLUMNISTS

Blessing proclaims physical/spiritual bond

I'm writing this column on Sunday, which is the feast day of St. Blaise. At the church I attended, this combination meant that they blessed our throats. At first I thought this was a bit distracting and bordered on the superstitious. After all, why throats? Why not shoulders and knees and hips? If this blessing is supposed to ward off sickness and infirmity, why not study statistics and bless throats found to be the most disease-prone?

Anyway, as I sat speculating about how I would reform the church for the better, I started looking on the faces of those whose throats had just been blessed. They looked really happy. They left church having heard the reading of the beatitudes, were treated to an exceptional homily, prayed the eucharistic prayer, and received Communion. But that throat blessing, which by some theological standards could be pretty marginal at best, made a big difference to everybody there.

So I started to wonder what it is about that blessing that appeals to us, and why it seems so attractive to all varieties of spirituality, transcends all sorts of pieties and has prevailed for so long. The answer is probably more complicated than can be laid out in the small space of this column, but some aspects of it can easily fit here. I think these elements combine to point out something of the essence of Catholicism.

For one thing, the ritual of the throat blessing is surrounded by an originating story. A story is at the core of every faith tradition. For Catholics, story and narra-



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

...tive are vitally important. Our origins are rooted not in rational arguments or assertions of truth, but in the community's experience of the Risen Lord handed on through story. The stories of Jesus in the Gospels are primary. Many other stories of individual Christians and of Christian communities working out their faith also make the message of God in Christ available to us.

For us, story precedes argument and transcends rationality. So we love hearing about generous gestures aimed at healing. We love a dramatic account describing someone's illness being relieved through the generosity and goodness of another. The story brings us into contact with God's goodness: The God we worship heals and gives us access to whatever we need to be healed. Mind you, I'm not advocating magic cures here; healing isn't synonymous with curing! But the stories surrounding the blessing of throats include a terrible malady of the throat that was healed.

Some negative views would want to associate God with sending the disease in

order to strengthen us through adversity or some such thing. But I think the truest Catholic view is just the opposite: Disease happens, and God gives us what we need to be healed in spite of it. Not a magical cure, but a genuine healing. That's part of why we love that story. It's part of why placing those candles around our necks one day a year is so appealing. God is good, and God acts for our healing through ordinary human objects and routine gestures that are part of life.

A teacher at a talk I attended not long ago held up a crucifix in one hand and a religious textbook in the other. He asked the class which was the better aid in teaching the meaning of Christianity. The class tended to think they should point to the book, which would be in keeping with the way we've come to think of learning. It's about words and rational thought and discursive reasoning, so it must be the book. In truth, however, as the teacher pointed out, the crucifix is the better teaching aid. That single object always tells a story. It invites us to retell in our minds and with our imaginations — instantly — the account of Jesus' death. We connect that, of course, to all sorts of other actions of generosity and service we know about. A true learning experience every time we look at it! It tells a story. Faith is conveyed in stories. Stories are made known through objects and gestures. We just love to get those throats blessed!

A second part of the throat blessing that touches the heart of Catholicism is its connection to the physical world. As

Catholics we are really and truly rooted in a worldview maintaining that God is present to us through physical objects. These are our sacramental signs — bread and wine and oil and water and the words of human conversation. And they are every single material object and human event that can happen. For us, God is present and active in ordinary life.

One of the presumptions about Catholicism is that we are all upright about sex and fearful of our own sexuality and our bodies. I think this is really a twisted view. I admit that, given the chance, I'd alter some aspects of our teachings on sexual ethics. I admit that sometimes American Catholics, especially, are afflicted with a kind of puritan viewpoint overlaid with a lot of Irish-Catholic Jansenism. We all still struggle with St. Augustine's frustrated attempt to deal with his lust by bathing in Plato's philosophy and Aquinas' synthesis of Aristotle, which separated matter from form.

In spite of all this, there is a core of Catholic wisdom that unites the spiritual and the physical, that says that our bodies ARE temples of the Holy Spirit and vehicles for the experience of God. Far from separating our physical beings from our spiritual health, the heart of the Catholic religion connects these in vital ways. Blessing our throats proclaims this deeper truth; it is a lovely gesture that we can honestly, genuinely celebrate for a long time to come.

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

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1. God, 2. ordinary, 3. sin, 4. Paul, 5. Eucharist, 6. Lent

Mystery word: Gospel

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Thoughts to Consider



EDWIN SULEWSKI
Funeral Director

What are some ways to help a child who has lost a parent?

First it is important to make sure the child is honestly included in all information and planning. This means being honest about the death and answering the child's questions. It also means allowing but not forcing children to go to the funeral or visitation as they wish. Secondly, a child needs love and security. Let a child know they will be cared for, take an interest in schoolwork and include them in play. Some children resent being pressured to accept burdens beyond their reach. "Taking over for Dad or Mom" may be too much responsibility. Naturally, changes will occur but a child needs time and help in adjusting to them.

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