

# COLUMNISTS

## Focus on one's soul is not sign of selfishness

I have known for many years that Easter requires faith. This year seems to call for unparalleled depths of it. Our country is tracking down terrorists after the horror of September 11. Our church is embroiled in the worst scandal possible. The "Holy Land," scene of the original events that made Easter, is overrun with violence. The economy's been bad, business scandals abound, health care in our community is in disarray, and even the weather looks lousy this week.

All this calls to mind T.S. Eliot's proclamation that "April is the cruelest month." He made this comment to point out the irony of the promise of new life and renewal that comes in spring, even as death, decay and sin remain all around us and surely prevail anyway.

How on earth can we find Easter faith in the face of all this? Don't expect me to have the answer to that question. But I've looked to a few other sources and can take a hint from what I've learned there.

One source is Cardinal Newman, who once said the ultimate tragedy is not that we will die, but that we might never begin to live. At first glance I suppose that sounds silly. What can it mean that people already born don't "begin to live?" Yet I suppose we all know something of what he meant there. At times we can become so caught up in routine — in the expectations placed upon us, on complying with external standards and responding to demands all around us — that we actually feel dead inside. It is possible today, I think, to be so selfish that



the moral life

By Patricia Schoelles, SSJ

we end up feeling that we've lost our very selves. At times like this we feel less than alive. This is probably something of the experience that lies behind Newman's words.

There is no easy fix to this, of course. Economic troubles, war woes, churches and ministers who disappoint us don't really cause this rampant neglect of our interior life, but troubled times can make it more obvious. Sometimes we confuse appropriate care of the self — dare we use the word soul? — with selfish self-centeredness. We do well to make the distinction, I think. We all need to take time for attention to our own inner lives. We all need to question the ways in which we nurture the false selves that lurk within us and cause us to be manipulative and mean, petty and superficial. By constantly indulging in inappropriate self-centeredness we try, I suppose, to satisfy our desire for new and deeper life with trivialities that lead only to increased frustration. Real attention to our souls does not lead to or result from selfish-

ness. It leads to relationship — with self and God.

Sometimes even the spiritual aids we rely on can distract us from truthful attention to ourselves. I think this is often seen as we come to the end of Lent. We select some habit or substance and try to give it up for 44 days. Now it is obvious that we all need discipline. But focusing on this sort of practice can become more of an endurance contest than a real encounter with our own inner selves in ways that lead to renewal. It can all remain external to us, apart from ourselves and distant from our relationship with God. Instead of moving our souls closer to God and helping us dip into what really brings us life, we end up "running up brownie points with God." We don't begin to live again at all. We just grow increasingly tired of Lent.

So even our efforts at self-improvement can end up focusing us on our false selves and neglecting the real "self-work" that needs doing. In his book, *Seeds of Peace*, our own diocese's Msgr. William Shannon offers some suggestions for moving beyond purely external, and ultimately unhelpful, plans for self-denial. He would have us understand that when Jesus urged us to "deny our very selves," he was inviting us not to more discomfort and unpleasantness, but to a new beginning of our inner life. Rather than continuing the focus on externals while ignoring the "false self" within us that needs turning around and conversion, Shannon encourages us to focus, honest-

ly, on our self for a change.


For those of us having trouble finding Easter this year, we might try some of the practical hints Shannon offers in his book. He suggests, for example, that we might try taking a few minutes each day — even fewer than 20 — for silence and solitude. He says this is worth the struggle, and that just a few quiet moments of awareness every day will help us tend to our souls and increase our sense of peace. Maybe Cardinal Newman would understand that life begins in moments like that. In his book Shannon even suggests that we might seek some "family quiet time" when we pass on to our children the precious gift of silence and care of the inner life.

It would be impossible this year, I think, to expect to feel giddy with joy even at Easter, given the violence, unrest and tragedy around the world and affecting our country so directly. It would be foolish to expect to be unaffected by the difficulties in our church. We all share a sense of unease about the economy and the stability of our local communities. I am not proposing that we withdraw from these problems or try to escape from them by pursuing interior happiness. I am trying to say, with Cardinal Newman, that bad things happening do not make life a tragedy. Failing to live does, and we cannot live without some genuine tending to ourselves.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry.

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