

COLUMNISTS

Feast days showcase Christianity 'in the concrete'

Whenever we observe a Marian feast I start to speculate about the nature of feast days altogether. We have some great ones featuring particular churches. Others focus on events from Scripture in the life of Jesus, there are several dedicated to Mary and we have scores of days dedicated to other saints. I always like to imagine how these things got started. I suppose early on Christian communities recognized the need to find out what the Gospel message means "in the concrete."

The fact that we learn about God in stories rather than in theology textbooks highlights this need. We do not have a record of the thoughts of Jesus. We have only scant record of his prayers. He did not take time to record his philosophy of life so we could all read it. In fact, we have four story books about him, written years after his death and highlighting his followers' impressions of events from his life.

Thus, we don't have an abstract account of what God looks like in the concrete. Instead, we have concrete glimpses of what he did, what he said, how he responded to those around him, how he was received by others. We have images of what it looks like when God "invades" a human life, not abstract treatises about the actions of God among us.

Feast days appeal to this same impulse in us. We need to know what the tradition, the Gospel, looks like in the concrete circumstances of life. Furthermore,



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

we need to have that represented to us over and over again in new and different circumstances. We need to see what sanctity looks like in France during the 15th century, in Africa in the 4th, in Jerusalem in the 2nd, in Italy during the 13th, in Ireland and Baltimore and Mexico and everywhere. We need concrete pictures from the lives of saints so we can learn, gradually, how to adapt the Gospel to our own times.

The pictures we get are very diverse indeed. Catherine of Siena behaved nothing like Joan of Arc, yet both embody the Christian message for their own times and places. Cyril of Jerusalem was a bishop, but his story is nothing like St. Patrick, also a bishop. Yet both show us glimpses of what the Gospel looked like in their time and place and in the concrete struggles that each engaged in.

St. Mary Magdalene apparently made quite a few mistakes along the way. Ignatius of Loyola built a model of sancti-

ty on military service. St. Bernard was a scholar, a monk and used his preaching skills to send men off to fight a religious war! St. Monica was a pretty controlling mother, and her son St. Augustine tried to postpone his conversion until after he'd sewn sufficient wild oats.

What a conglomeration of personalities; what a contradiction of activities!

For those who envision an overly abstract version of our faith, forget it. The message of the communion of saints shows us that the Christian life is really quite concrete, really quite connected with real life, not at all uniform or monolithic, transcends time and space yet adapts to both, and is extremely diverse. We need to have the tradition presented and re-presented to us across cultures and across centuries.

A wonderful contemporary scholar by the name of William McClendon wrote a book called *Biography as Theology*. For McClendon, religious convictions are living things, giving shape to actual lives. He advises us to discover what people believe by studying what they do, not what they write or think. The Mennonite tradition is like this: For years the Mennonites shunned the study of theology, maintaining that such activity makes Christianity too abstract and distracts its practitioners from the actual living of "the Way." They wouldn't even use a word like "discipleship" since it made an abstract of the concrete idea of "disci-

pling."

I think this same theme attends to the existence of parishes and religious orders. We need personal example. We need to discover what goodness is by watching what people do, and doing likewise. By doing good actions, we shape our own characters and consciences. Parishes and Christian communities become actual "schools" of the Christian way of life. As we watch the good that others do, we become trained in goodness too.

Last month we heard and read several talks that Pope John Paul delivered in Toronto. We heard him teach and we learned some of his concerns and the emphasis of his thought. But when we watched him struggle up the steps to his airplane, and when we witnessed him descending those stairs and leading prayer throughout his difficult journey in a now-hobbled body, we literally saw what "courage in the concrete" and dedication to the Christian message means.

Marian feasts, like the days honoring other saints, remind us that we need to view concrete images of what Christianity really looks like. Our wonderful liturgical calendar helps us to do this, and to prepare to find our own "saints for today" to help us know how to live for our time.

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MISSION NEWS



These Indian seminarians are on their way to a local village for persons with leprosy. They travel by bike for more than five miles — but do not mind. Said one:

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