

Even in sorrow, thank God



Patricia Schoelles, SSJ

The Moral Life

knowledge today's grief, but to expect the "infinitely more" that God has promised.

In Psalm 41, for several stanzas, we enter into the anguish of the author who speaks about the malice of enemies "who whisper to each other about me," about a sickness which is fatal, about abandonment and denial by "friends who shared my table." The sense of misery conveyed by the author of this psalm is almost palpable.

Still, the psalm does not end on that note. The expectation in the last stanza is that God is still good, that God is still present even in the face of such gloom. The expectation is that God's favor will sustain the sufferer and that ultimate triumph awaits one because of God's faithfulness.

I don't think we can expect to be giddy with glee every year on Thanksgiving. I think Sunday's paper named a prevailing state of existence for lots of us at this time in our national and ecclesial life. With the prophets and psalmist, though, we can draw on a mature faith that dwells in real thankfulness even at this time. Psalm 41 concludes with the expectation that "I, whom you uphold, will go unscathed, set by you in your presence forever. Blessed be the God of Israel from all eternity and forever. Amen." Quite an invitation to thanksgiving, in this case by someone filled with sorrow.

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Thanksgiving is coming. Still, Sunday's Rochester newspaper featured an article describing the situation of many Americans at this time. The article pointed out that many are in a state of emotional numbness following a period of highly stressful situations and events — 9/11, the anthrax and continuing terrorist threats, the troubling economy, families facing layoffs and financial problems. As church members we could add the scandals that have rocked us, new questions about parish viability, school funding and disappointing responses from Rome to issues we care about.

How do we move from this state of "ennui" to a state of praise and thanks to God? How do we cultivate a holiday spirit in the midst of such gloom?

Even the most significant prayers of our tradition aren't all happiness and light. The psalms are full of prayers of lament. These express great sorrow and even anger at God. Readings from the prophets also witness to periods of distress and disease. Any thought that either our prayer or our moods ought to express only happiness and joy is soon lost as one uses passages like these:

We wait for peace, to no avail/for a time of healing, but terror comes instead./We recognize, O Lord, our wickedness/the guilt of our fathers/that we have sinned against you. — Jeremiah 14:20.

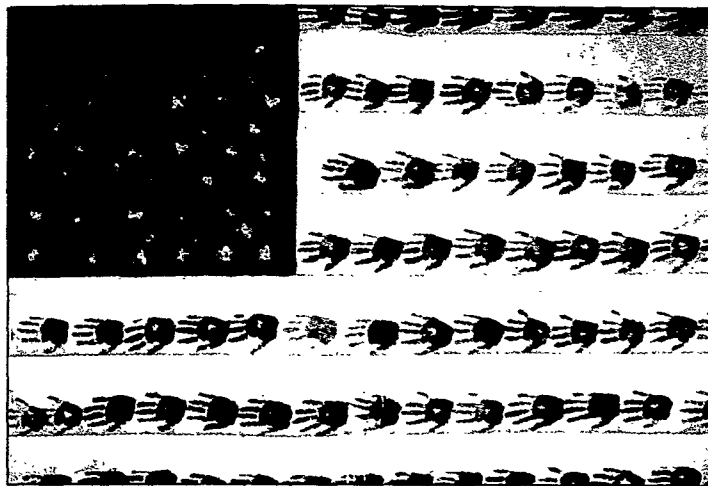
God, now you abandon and scorn us/you no longer march with our armies/you

allow the enemy to push us back/and let those who hate us raid us when it suits them. — Psalm 44

For all people and for all believers, periods of frustration, fear, loneliness and disappointment arise. It is not wrong to acknowledge these to God, and we certainly need not pretend that we are happy and secure when we are not. Whatever is natural to life is natural to faith and to prayer.

Evoking a sense of thanksgiving, however, is also profoundly Christian. Eucharist, our central act of worship, means thanksgiving. Oddly, this sense of gratitude can be cultivated even in the midst of suffering and numbness. Even as we recognize that there is much about life that we would like to be otherwise, and even as we lament the real losses that we experience, the sense of relationship with God can still prevail.

In many ways thanksgiving implies an ability to reach beyond oneself in a profound orientation to God, who we know as the giver of life itself and the one who calls us even in the midst of life's capriciousness to understanding that surpasses our struggle and woe. A classic pattern of prayer is to ac-



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Members of Junior Girl Scout Troop 841 at St. Joseph School in Penfield used their hand and thumb prints to create a flag to honor veterans and their country.

Using the songs he cited: "Sing a New Song" is Psalm 98, as is "All The Ends of the Earth;" "Taste and See" is Psalm 34, as is "I Will Bless the Lord." I'm not sure about "Come to the Table of Plenty," but there is a song "Come to the Feast" which is adapted from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. You see, these are not "English music hall" songs or even "Irish pub tunes." Rather, they are songs which Jesus Himself might have sung in the pubs of Jerusalem. So, sing out, Bill, and give praise to God. That's what's important.

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Sing both old and new

To the editor:

Regarding Bill Kehoe's letter in the Nov. 7, 2002 *Catholic Courier* concerning elders refraining from singing "pub tunes" played in church: He must not attend Mass very often. "Holy God We Praise Thy Name" is played a couple dozen or more times a year, including this past Sunday, at our Masses. We also sang "Sing a New Song." Both were appropriate.

Mr. Kehoe does not speak

for all of us born before 1950.

Our God loves us; that is a cause for joy and our music should reflect that joy and love. Many people also complain that we sing the same old songs over and over. Why can't we have something new? As long as the lyrics and music of newer songs as well as older songs glorify God they have a place in church. If we've been singing the same songs for several hundred years, maybe God's tired of hearing them, too.

How would Latin glorify God more when we don't know what we are singing? At one time Schubert's "Ave Maria" was not sung in Catholic churches. Why? Because it was considered a "show tune." Imagine, Schubert's "Hail Mary" not sung in our churches.

An open mind and heart will appreciate the old as well as the new songs as long as they speak of God's love for us and our love for God. In addition, we can thank God for the talented people who can put into words and music that love.

Maybe someone can explain how a song can be Protestant or Catholic. I can't.

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