

Praying is response to God's presence



Patricia Schoelles, SSJ

The Moral Life

Last week I received an e-mail that included a quote from Pope John Paul II. Part of his message referred to vacations. He stated: "Summer vacation, however, which begins now for some, can become a propitious occasion to renew the interior life, if it is not wasted in dissipation and simple diversion." Since my idea of summer vacation has mostly to do with at least simple diversion if not outright dissipation, at first I scorned the passage altogether.

Then on the weekend I read a review of a new book by Jon Krakauer. Krakauer, a self-proclaimed agnostic, was quoted as saying: "I don't know if God even exists, although I confess I find myself praying in times of great fear, or despair, or astonishment at the display of unexpected beauty."

We've all had moments of doubt about faith, God's existence or goodness or involvement in human life. And even in moments like this, we may find ourselves responding in ways similar to Krakauer. Moments of fear, despair and wonder evoke a primal response in us to a being who is greater, more powerful, even more necessary than we are.

Those who study and write about prayer agree. Even in so-called pagan societies, years before Christ, there is mention of prayer. In the writings of Homer, we find that prayer to the gods was a common experience. The roots of that sort of prayer lay in the power of

the gods: They were stronger and needed to be favorably disposed to us if things were to work out well for humanity.

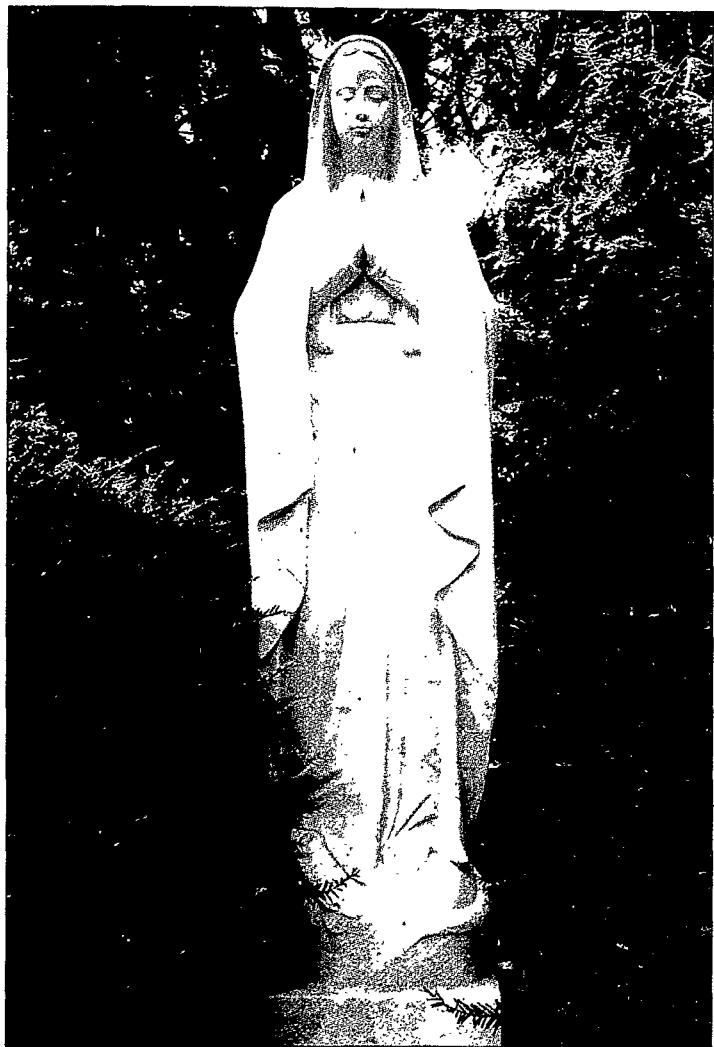
We know that Jesus prayed. Christians witness in the New Testament that Jesus' public prayers were dominated by his sense of being the trusting son of his Father. At his baptism God calls him "Beloved Son," and he addresses God as "Abba," or Father. The church proclaims and invites believers to enter into Christ's very own relationship with God. For us, too, prayer becomes, in the words of James M. Reese, "a personal response to the felt presence of God in an effort to intensify that presence as a significant force in human existence."

This view of prayer is closer to what Krakauer was talking about. He reminds us that some human experiences cause us to feel the presence of something beyond ourselves. These experiences can be negative, such fear or despair, or they can be profoundly positive ones filled with awe.

According to Reese, and watching Jesus in the New Testament, prayer is our response whenever we become aware of God's presence. Christian prayer is not so much an attempt to "get something done or make something happen" as it is striving to intensify that sense of presence and love. For believers, the desire to make God a more significant force in our life is constant. Prayer is above all a relational exercise through which we open ourselves to God and invite God to become more revealed and known by us. The amount of time we spend in prayer is not as important as the degree of openness we have to God's presence and activity in our hearts and in all that happens to us.

After all this, I return to the comment by Pope John Paul. We don't have to use our vacation time for a torturous quest for God or the things of God. A simple change of scenery and tempo can afford us an opportunity to be surprised by an unexpected sense of God's presence. We don't have to spend big bucks or arrive at a terrific tourist destination for this to happen. Sipping iced tea in the shade on a hot afternoon, enjoying the flowering of summer gardens, playing a fun and competitive round of golf or enjoying the companionship of friends can be just the trick.

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



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

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10001 or Web site CourageRC.net or CourageRC.org.

"Christ summons all his followers — whether they are married or living a single celibate life — to a higher standard of loving." — from "Always Our Children," from the Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family.

Marian Buchheit
 County Line Road
 Webster

Finds column 'disturbing'

To the editor:

Sisters Schoelles' failure to affirm the church's official position on sodomy is both disappointing and disturbing.

It is disappointing in that she slides by the church's position, aligns it with evangelicals and subsequently suggests there should be more than one norm on this issue.

It is disturbing in that as

President of St. Bernard's School of Theology & Ministry, our only diocesan school of theology, her "get real" comment and proposal of norms outside of those accepted by Rome establish her as personally in dissent with Rome. One wonders if the president of our school of theology should be so blatant or public in her dissent. Another local theologian, Charles Curran, lost his position for similar public dissent.

Further, if Sister Schoelles, who serves at the pleasure of the bishop, is really promoting the bishop's view, then our diocesan leadership is posing its theology based on "secular political progress" rather than the position of theology advanced by Rome's guardians of the faith.

"Get real" perhaps should signal to caring Catholics of Rochester the degree of dissent present in our diocesan leadership.

D.M. Davies
 Harrington Drive
 Fairport

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