NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Measuring up

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Mar. 10, 2012

As each Lenten Sunday draws us nearer to Holy Week and Easter, the scriptures urge us to measure ourselves against the mysteries we celebrate so we can be better, grow in God more deeply and believe more fully -- both as individuals and as a community.

Third Sunday of Lent
Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19

With Moses and our ancestors in the faith, we are to evaluate our respect for God?s laws (first reading, Exodus). The laws that govern our attitudes and actions toward God and one another are regarded as the terms of our covenantal relationship with God. These precepts challenge our efforts at honesty, uprightness, justice and fairness. They safeguard us and our communities while preparing us to accept the far greater challenges posed by Jesus. In his words and in his works, Jesus affirmed and fulfilled the law of Moses, but he also insisted that his disciples accept that law as a basis for a far more comprehensive law: Love God and love your neighbor -- i.e., all others -- as yourself.

Paul, in his Corinthian correspondence (second reading), invites his readers to measure their wisdom against the wisdom of God. For the Jews, who expected a royal military leader to free them from their oppressors, there seemed to be little wisdom in the idea of a suffering savior who would die an ignominious death to achieve his purposes. For the Greeks, who placed little value on the body, the very notion of a crucified Christ seemed absurd. But for God, whose ways defy human expectations and logic, a suffering Jesus who gave his life for sinners on the cross was the purest, wisest expression of love imaginable.

During Lent, as we ponder God?s wisdom, we are challenged to examine our own attitude toward suffering. If we are honest, most of us would admit that we go out of our way to avoid suffering, and when it comes, we do whatever is necessary to rid ourselves of its burden. But the wisdom of God, made flesh in Jesus, tells us to reach out and touch those who suffer, to ease their struggle or at least share it, to lighten the load. Moreover, when suffering comes our way, we can unite our struggle and pain with the salvific suffering of Jesus for the ongoing redemption of our world.

In today?s Gospel, Jesus evaluates the authenticity of the Temple and its liturgy and finds it wanting. His anger was justified; a place of prayer and communion with God had been reduced to a marketplace. However, before we are too quick to criticize others, we might ask ourselves, ?If Jesus came today to my church, what might he do??

Would Jesus recognize our celebrations of the Eucharist as the same gift he left his disciples as a remembrance of himself? Could he find his way through all the rites and rituals? Would he be surprised that there are no women who serve as deacons, as they did in the early church? What would he think of the rich décor of our churches, which now have to be locked to guard them from theft? Would he evaluate the amount we spend on our programs for feeding the poor and sheltering the homeless, and find it wanting? Would Jesus hear preachers defend the marginalized, the undocumented and all victims of injustice? Would he see in each of us a reflection of the love that God has lavished on us without measure?

Perhaps the last line of today?s Gospel will help us to sort out the answers to these questions: ?Jesus did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.? Therefore, it is with a sense of humble confidence that we take the measure of ourselves this Lent. We may not always meet the challenge of our belonging to Christ, but he who knows our hearts and our nature also knows our good attempts at holiness along with our failures.

[Patricia Sánchez holds a master?s degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

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