

Party on: Anniversary planning

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

For years my multiyear calendar has had a listing for April 19, 2009: “Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, Minneapolis.” “You must *really* be in demand!” someone or other who peruses the schedule says. Hardly. Mt. Olive, a favorite parish of family members in the Twin Cities, invited me to its 90th anniversary in 1999, and I responded that I only do centennials—something historians have a hard time resisting. Mt. Olive said: “Then put us down for 2009.” I did, mentally noting, as always, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught us to think, *sub conditione Iacobus*: James 4:13-15. You can look it up.

For some years I’ve been a marginal member of some commissions with a hand in planning the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial, also coming in 2009. When I’ve noted how long-range that planning was, people in the conference-staging business scored me for my naiveté. You *have* to plan years ahead, to book hotels, convention centers, speakers, media, etc., they advise.

Planners like to connect with anniversaries—real, gerrymandered or made up. Some years ago some historians at the University of Wisconsin in Madison decided they wanted a conference featuring Augustine. The problem was that we were nowhere near a semicentennial or centennial of his birth (354) or death (430). So the committee, still wanting a conference, chose to celebrate the 1,600th anniversary of Augustine’s ordination. I doubt whether Augustine himself celebrated anniversaries of his ordination. But those Badger historians did.

This year is a major anniversary of the birth of Bonhoeffer (100th) and of Mozart (250th). Woe to those who did not plan early. I’m advised that it’s too late to plan events for 2007; 2008 is more realistic. Looking to that year and the ’58s and ’08s in church history, we find: 258, martyrdom of Saint Cyprian; 858, Photius, called “most learned man in Europe,” becomes patriarch of Constantinople; 1308, Duns Scotus, scholastic writer, dies; 1508, Michelangelo starts painting Sistine Chapel ceiling; 1608, Jesuit state of Paraguay established; 1808, Catholic see of Baltimore made Metropolitan see; 1958, Pope John XXIII elected.

Historians or other commemorators can have their pick, slim as the pickings may be. The 750th anniversary of Cyprian's martyrdom merits notice, but there's not much chance of a local committee taking it up, since his home region in Africa is now all-Muslim. Most Catholics will not be in the mood to commemorate Duns Scotus these years, and most Paraguayans will skip the "reduction" by the Jesuits. Baltimore Catholics will hurrah and huzzah, American Catholics needing celebrations these years, and we'll all tip our hats or cross ourselves remembering John XXIII.

Photius remains an interesting choice. The most learned man in Europe—but how do modern historians know this? How did anyone know it in 858? Were there ACT, SAT or Ph.D. exams? Maybe we could celebrate him anyway with a "most learned man in America" contest. Or we could give the Roman Catholics "what fer" by remembering Photius for deposing and anathematizing Pope Nicholas II. And though Photius may be culturally alien to Protestant fundamentalists, they ought to like the patriarch who argued that "even the smallest neglect of the traditions leads to the complete denial of all doctrine."

I'd vote for a Michelangelo event. The visuals would be great, the travel industry would profit, and we would have five years to celebrate—the Sistine Chapel venture having taken that long. Here's to a fig leaf for the portrayal of Adam and to the Sistine's 500th. I can hardly wait.