

Reach Out And Touch



Every child needs the loving touch whether he lives in affluence or poverty. (NC Photo., courtesy OEO)

By DOLORES CURRAN
"Don't ever touch a child," warned my Ed. Psych. prof. "Keep objective — aloof. Don't get involved with a student's personal problems," cautioned a beginning teacher's handbook.

"Don't smile before Christmas," advised my first principal.

"Never show your own feelings in front of the class," said a coordinator. "Strive to be neuter."

Thank God, that era of education is over, the mid-fifties brand of education psychology. Strive to be neuter. We did so strive and, unfortunately, we're reaping some of the results today.

At that time, children were students, great chasms to be filled with information and passed on to the next stage. They weren't people with special needs and feelings. If a teacher slipped and became "involved," he was reminded of his duty to remain objective. Still, most of us slipped; in retrospect not often enough.

I'm still haunted by a particular omission of mine. I was teaching sophomore English in a large suburban high school where rather inflexible standards were encouraged. A lovely girl in one of my classes consistently failed to complete homework, pass tests or turn in makeup work.

Instead of finding out why, I gave her the standard warnings. Later, after she dropped out of school, I learned that both her parents were alcoholic and that she, 16-years-old, was trying to hold the family to-

gether. If only I had given in to my natural feelings and let her pour out her troubles, we might have been able to save her and the family.

We must show them they are unique individuals with valuable feelings, feelings that don't need to be forced underground. By our own example, we can show them that it's right and natural for people to exhibit joy, anger, sorrow and hope. We aren't robots, neuter, or computer cards.

If we act that way, it's because we've "successfully" controlled our feelings to the point that we're not longer free to act. We are imprisoned within ourselves.

Children are free and we envy them that freedom to express themselves, to love themselves and to enjoy life as it comes. Paradoxically, while we're envying them, we're stifling their freedom by saying, "Big boys don't cry," "Don't touch me," and "Don't smile if you don't know her."

We have a national abhorrence of touching one another. When there's a chance someone might embrace us at a wedding or a funeral, all sorts of feelings begin churning inside. If we meet someone who takes our hand and refuses to let it go, we become uncomfortable. We snicker at the idea of Frenchmen kissing one another — two men! Yet, we wish we could be more open, freer to tell someone we like him, comfortable in expressing disagreement.

We are caught between two eras: the one where we were taught that strict control over

our feelings was good and right, and today, when we're recognizing our youngsters' rebellion against an unfeeling society.

The hippie love ethic may have failed but it pointed up a real need in our technological society, the need for parents to be open, tender and demonstrative with their children.

Children need to be told we love them. We can't leave it to chance. They need to have an arm around them, even after they pass the age of reason and especially in adolescence.

Likewise, they need to see their parents in love every once in awhile. Otherwise, they'll reach the very logical conclusion that love ends with marriage and they'll take their cue from us in imitating our coldness, our restraints, and our discomfort in showing any emotion.

I remember the comment of an American friend as we watched a European family on a picnic. They freely hugged one another, parents and children and so obviously enjoyed an uninhibited day together in the countryside that my friend sighed, "And we think we have all that it takes to be happy. They have nothing but they have everything. Look how they love each other."

Ironically, it isn't that we don't love our children. We do. We seek all kinds of ways of telling them. We buy them things, we scold them, we fret over them, and we pray for them. It would be a lot easier if we just told them.

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Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. McBRIEN

Q. In our diocese we can now fulfill our Sunday Mass obligation by going to Mass on Saturday. I have read and heard so many reasons why it is correct theologically that they almost begin to sound like excuses. If we are to be honest, the reason is that it is a matter of convenience to the people. God gave us the commandment to keep holy the Sabbath Day. He did not say to make it whichever day will meet our convenience.

A. You assume that when God said, "Keep holy the Sabbath," he was referring to Sunday. You must recall, however, that Israel's Sabbath was on Saturday, not Sunday.

The change from Saturday to Sunday came later and was occasioned by the Church's desire to commemorate the Resurrection of the Lord, which occurred on the first day of the week. "Hence the Lord's day is the original feast day, and it should be proposed to the piety of the faithful and taught to them in such a way that it may become in fact a day of joy and of freedom from work" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n. 196).

I do agree with you that the principal reason for this most recent modification of the Sunday obligation is one of convenience rather than one of theology. The idea that a feast day begins with Vespers on the previous afternoon or evening makes little or no sense to people who have long since escaped the influence of monasticism.

Q. The 1970 Official Catholic Directory has just been published. It discloses that conversions to the Catholic Church were down by another 10% last year. Aren't we Catholics responsible for this dropoff? We seem to be spending so much time downgrading ourselves and telling everyone how great the Protestants are.

A. One cannot say with certainty that the 10% decrease in conversions to the Catholic Church is either good or bad. If the decline means that many people who really should be in the Catholic Church are not coming in because of some unworthy and unnecessary reason, then it is a bad thing.

It is an oversimplification to say that the declining conversion rate is an effect of kind words about Protestants. Of course, if what we are now saying about Protestantism is wrong, and we are just saying it to be nice, then this is deplorable. It is never justifiable to be dishonest, even for good motives.

But one must first show that the new ecumenical spirit between Catholics and Protestants violates the truth of the Gospel. However, if telling the truth about Protestants means that fewer people will want to enter the Catholic Church, then so be it.

Only those should enter the Catholic Church who want to confess the Lordship of Jesus, for the sake of God's Kingdom, in union with the college of bishops and the chief bishop, the pope. However, the burden remains on the shoulders of Catholics to show, by their Christian lives, that membership in the Catholic Church leads to a more fruitful and effective implementation of Christ's preaching and ministry.

The First Vatican Council taught that the strongest apologetical sign is the holiness of the Church. This means that, before non-Catholics are going to take the Catholic Church seriously, they must be able to see that Catholics practice what they preach. And before non-Christians are going to take the whole Body of Christ seriously, they must be able to see that Christians in general practice what they preach. (See the Pastoral Constitution, n. 93).

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Feeling Like a Christian

By FR. CARL J. PFEIFER, S.J.

This afternoon I asked two women to tell me what their first thoughts were about the place of feelings in Christian life. Both answered quite spontaneously and with conviction. Phyllis, about 35, responded without hesitation. "Emotions have little to do with Christian living. It's more a matter of the will, more an intellectual thing."

About 15 minutes later I met Joan and asked her the same question. She is about 10 years younger than Phyllis. Her answer was enthusiastic. "Human feelings and Christian life? Why, that's what it's all about. That's where it really is."

I suspect that many adult Catholics would tend to agree more readily with Phyllis, seeing Christian living as chiefly a matter of reason, of the soul rather than the body. Perhaps, deep down, they wish at least sometimes that they could share Joan's feelings.

This is understandable, even if painful, for many of us grew up hearing about the dangers of emotion, particularly of certain feelings. Feelings were not to be trusted. They were not only suspect but were to be acted against. "To be a good Christian requires the ability to rise above feelings." "Love is a matter of the will, not of the feelings." "You need not like your neighbor as long as you love him."

Formerly, in almost every area of Catholic life — prayer, liturgy, works of mercy, faith, vocation — what was seen as important was not feelings but a good intention and a strong will. Important decisions should be the result of logical reasoning, uninfluenced by emotional distractions. The harder a good deed was, the more against one's feelings, the more virtuous it would be.

Today there is a strong reaction against such a rationalistic religion. The reaction is felt in most of the Christian Churches, indeed in most areas

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of contemporary culture as well.

The Pentecostal Movement is sweeping through Protestant Churches and finding a welcome in the Catholic Church in many parts of the United States. Folk Masses, "meaningful" liturgies in small intimate groups, are expressions of a new appreciation of the place of feeling in worship. Retreats have been frequently modified from silence and seclusion to such an extent that they are often called "Weekends of Christian Experience."

There is a desire among man to feel fellowship, and to express this with touch. "Christian Encounter" groups meet to explore the riches of feeling in human relationships, feelings often inhibited or blocked in more formal meetings of Christians.

This is undoubtedly influenced by the cultural atmosphere in which Christians live. Contemporary youth cultures, in particular, place great stress on genuinely feeling reality, not just thinking about it. Experimentation with drugs like LSD supposedly frees one to more intensely feel the pulsations of life normally not experienced. Drugs heighten sensitivity and feeling, making them more acute.

There are no doubt abuses in the more extreme cultural and religious manifestations of this new exaltation of feeling and rejection of reason, but there is also a soundness in the trend

toward a Christianity that values emotion in human life.

While excessive emotionalism that disrespects reason is rightfully suspect, just as suspect is an austere rationalism that unreasonably distrusts feeling. Man is no more a disembodied soul than merely a complex body of molecular matter. He is both a "rational animal" and a "risible animal"—that is, one who is able to laugh. Men are capable of deep reflection, astute analysis and the most complex scientific reasoning. But they also feel angry, anxious, jealous, tender, elated or discouraged.

What is needed is a harmonious balance between reason and emotion. Man's spirit can remain sterile unless insight finds a resonance in feelings. His emotions can run wild or flag unless they share the guidance of his mind and the determined commitment of his will. Growth toward such harmony is the task of Christian living and the balance between reason and feeling is to be sought after, even if rarely maintained.

The renewed respect for feeling in Christian living is healthy and sound—even if at times it leads to abuse. The world today indeed needs deep thought and reflection, but it requires a reasonableness clothed in compassion.

Christians certainly have important truths to share with mankind as well as with each other, but unless the truth creates vibrations of human emotion, it may well remain sterile.