

The Whys and Hows of Christian Formation

By FATHER CARL J. PFEIFER, SJ

For several years I worked with delinquent boys in a state correctional institution.

Every boy, within six weeks after being sentenced by the courts, escaped from the institution, which as a matter of deliberate policy had no walls or armed guards. Normally the boy was apprehended by the police in a few hours and was returned to the institution.

No threats, fear of punishment, no promise of privileges was effective in preventing these regular escapes. Surprisingly the motive was not to be free, as many of the boys had little but fear and poverty to run back to.

The chief reason was that escaping had value in the eyes of the boys. To run away was seen as a sign of courage. Not until a boy was able to achieve a deeper sense of self-worth based on truer values would he stop running away. Once he recognized that he could be a man without running, he stopped trying to escape. After the boy came to appreciate the value of entering into the rehabilitation program of the institution, no walls or armed guards were needed for him.

This experience exemplifies what religious educators mean when they speak of conscience formation as centering on values rather than on rules or commandments.

Most people, young or old, will obey a law or rule only as long as someone is around to

enforce the law, unless they personally appreciate and embrace the value which the law is enacted to preserve. If a person is aware of the importance to himself and others of respect for private property, there is good reason to hope that he will not steal. There is no guarantee, however, as many people do what they know is harmful to themselves or society.

On the other hand, a person who is without an appreciation of the value of respecting people's possessions will normally steal unless prevented by fear or force.

Because of this fact of human experience, religious educators more and more place their emphasis on helping the young recognize and appreciate the value of honesty, respect for other's rights, obedience, compassion, cooperation, peace.

This approach is in fact more traditional than formation of conscience based on the ten commandments. Most of us adults grew up during a period of the Church's life when, for many complex historical and theological reasons, Christian moral teaching focused on laws more than on values. This was not the approach of the New Testament, nor of the early Church Fathers, nor of the great Medieval theologians like Thomas Aquinas.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount focuses on the importance of free choice flowing from inner conviction. His stress is on the reasons underlying the laws, the values which the commandments were created to preserve.

He was concerned with the inner response to human value; the "heart" more than external actions. Anger and lust were to be seriously avoided, not merely murder and adultery (Mt. 5: 21-31). In this way His teaching "fulfills the law" (Mt 5:17), which His Spirit guides people to freely observe by loving their neighbor.

St. Paul translates Jesus' teaching into a practical and positive approach to developing the inner motivation Jesus commanded. He directs Christians to focus their attention on basic human values. "Your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous, or worthy of praise" (Phil 4:8). In this way, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, their love can grow to the extent that they will be able to "discover the will of God and know what is

good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do" (Rom 12:2; see also Phil 1:9-10).

The Second Vatican Council urges that this traditional approach to conscience formation be adopted. At the beginning of its Declaration on Christian Education the Council refers explicitly to the moral formation of the young. "They should be helped to acquire gradually a more mature sense of responsibility toward pursuing authentic freedom... This holy Synod likewise affirms that children and young people have a right to be encouraged to weigh moral values with an upright conscience, and to embrace them by personal choice, and to know and love God more adequately".

According to the Council, conscience formation is basically education for responsibility.

A responsible person does good because it is good, not just because it is commanded by law. In so doing, according to Judaean-Christian tradition going back to the Old Testament, a person may recognize and respond to God's calls or commands, which come to people through experience as well as through commandments and laws.

Formation of conscience of the individual Christian fits the pattern of moral discernment followed by the whole Church, as the Council points out. "The people of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord, Who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs, and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age" (Church in Modern World, 11).

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Q. We say that a Christian differs from a non-Christian by his affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus. How does a Catholic Christian differ from a non-Catholic Christian?

A. As Hans Kung wrote on the eve of the Second Vatican Council in his book, "The Council, Reform, and Reunion," the fundamental issue dividing Catholics from their brother Christians is that of ecclesiastical office.

Christians of differing traditions can, and often do, agree among themselves on the essential meaning of the Church as People of God, on the importance of worship, and especially on the Lordship of Jesus, as you indicated in the question. But the issue on which fundamental argument develops is the issue of ecclesiastical office, specifically the question of the authority held and exercised by the college of bishops with the pope at its center and head.

And this is not merely a question of external organization. On the contrary, one's idea of ecclesiastical office will determine one's understanding of the total process by which a Christian comes to know the meaning of the Gospel and then puts that meaning into words.

Most Christians agree that we come to an understanding of the Gospel in many different ways and through various sources: the Bible, the interpretations of the Bible by the Fathers of the Church, the teachings of the early ecumenical councils, the writings of certain theologians such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, and even some of the data provided by nontheological disciplines, such as psychology and sociology.

Christians, however, do not agree on the role and authority of the college of bishops and, more specifically, on the meaning of the papal office. Non-Catholic Christians do not acknowledge that the college of bishops has an irreplaceable function in holding in balance and in creative tension the various factors which make it possible to understand and to express the Gospel; namely, Scripture, tradition, and contemporary Christian experience (see the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, chapter III, and the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, chapter II.)

That is to say, when the Catholic is trying to make up his mind about some matter that touches upon his understanding of the Gospel or upon its implications in that ethical order, he will always give serious weight to the guidelines proposed from this official, collegial source. And he will expect to be enlightened more often than not.

If a Catholic finds that he is constantly at odds with the stated positions of the Church's college of bishops, past and present, then he must be prepared to reassess his initial acceptance of, and commitment to, the Catholic tradition. In other words, he must begin to ask himself the question: Why am I a Catholic?



The grace, the life and love, of God enters into every human event transforming it into a source of holiness. The photo, by John Zimmerman, is of five skiers soaring on slopes of British Columbia's famous Bugaboos.

What Place Grace in Man's Life?

By FR. CARL J. PETER

If the God who is Love itself is everywhere, then somehow His grace is too. The converse is likewise true. Neither He nor His grace exists in a state of isolation in a world where all things were created in Christ from the beginning.

But to say that His having love and its effects are everywhere does not mean He is everywhere in the same way or that the graced character of people and things is constant. His sustaining presence in the atom, in autumn leaves, and in the winter snow is one sort of thing. But His presence within a man's heart is that of a friend. To be sure, it is especially from the human side of the relationship that differences in His grace are so significant.

To believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of all men means that each individual is really affected by His grace. Whether or not one adverts to this fact at the time (or indeed ever), it is to this grace that he reacts in all his moral choices. And it is precisely in

this light that the diagnostic role of Christian Faith in human life can be seen.

The universality of grace (which is implied in God's will to save all men in Jesus Christ), should not make the Church and Sacraments seem unimportant.

The air man breathes will help show why this is so. Except in a vacuum, it is always present in varying states of purity and rarity. Recognizing this makes a difference in the way one lives and acts as when he pays attention to the degree of smog, humidity, or pollen. Not every man concerns himself about these things but some do and must or the others will suffer needlessly. Something similar is true of God's universal presence and grace.

The grace of God is everywhere and therefore it can be forgotten or overlooked. Indeed it can also be taken for granted, like the air one breathes. Then far from exerting a conscious influence on the way one lives, it is hardly

a factor at all in his free choices and life-style. One role of Christian Faith is to point out this presence of grace to instruct man of his sublime destiny and to keep him from forgetting.

That same word of Faith helps man size up or assess his own moral condition. His life of grace before God must be understood to be sure; but it must as well be purified and strengthened.

Finally Faith must aim at challenging and lifting man up when he is discouraged. Grace is everywhere but God did not take evil out of the world. He left it there to be overcome by good in imitation of His Son's death and resurrection.

This is the diagnostic role of Faith with regard to God's grace. The latter is everywhere but in radically different ways with corresponding implications for the man or woman who hopes to build with its help a future better than the past.