

Letting Our Children Grow Up

By FR. CARL J. PFEIFER, SJ

Conscience formation in Catholic Schools and CCD classes appears to many to be overly permissive. There seems to be too much concern about conscience and freedom, whereas law and authority are said to be underplayed. The Ten Commandments and the Precepts of the Church do not seem to occupy the same place of importance as in the past.

Concerned parents and teachers often express fear that today's young Christians are being educated more to a secular humanism than to traditional Christian moral principles and ideals.

Religious educators are as concerned as are the concerned parents about the moral formation of children and adolescents. They are suggesting ap-

proaches that on the surface may seem to be reducing conscience to "doing one's own thing."

However, a closer look at these "new" approaches reveals a close following of the approach of the Gospel, the directives of Vatican II, and sound conclusions of the modern social sciences.

An even closer study will show that in reality they are much more demanding and challenging than the familiar catechesis according to the Commandments of God and Precepts of the Church.

Like the approach most of us adult Catholics grew up with, the new strategies toward guiding the religious and ethical response of the young center on love of God and neighbor. No Christian ethic can do other-

wise, as anyone at all familiar with the New Testament readily admits. Jesus was clear on this: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments the whole law is based" (Mt 22:37-40).

On this all Christians are necessarily agreed: conscience formation must focus on enabling the young to grow in their ability to genuinely love God and neighbor. But how encourage and guide this growth?

Traditional and effective, in practical terms, is an approach that focuses on encouraging a growing sense of responsibility.

Newer religion texts help the

young (and the adult) recognize that love is proved not simply by keeping the ten commandments and the commands of those in authority. St. Paul already pointed out what all of us know from experience; over-emphasis on law often leads to a kind of legalism that inhibits real concern for others. Jesus Himself took issue with law-abiding religious leaders whose concern for law cooled their concern for people. The best traditions of the Old Testament pointed out that moral goodness is not guaranteed by keeping laws as much as by responding to human needs and genuine human values.

Religious education today encourages respect for law, whether it be God's or man's. But the young are guided to this respect by being challenged to explore the real needs and values of our time. Merely knowing the 7th commandment does not insure that a young Christian will not steal. There is hope that he will not steal if he comes to appreciate responsibly the personal and social value there is in respect for property, his own and others.

This is the approach Jesus used so naturally in His parables and in confrontations with people. Each parable is a challenge to reflect on life and on

God's Word, to try to focus one's mind and heart on what is of genuine value and on the needs of others. Jesus nowhere urges permissiveness to law and authority, but His emphasis is on responding to people and reality, to growth in a sense of responsibility.

Vatican Council II urges this same approach to conscience formation. Even children have "the right to appraise moral values with a right conscience, to embrace them with a personal adherence, together with a deeper knowledge and love of God." In this way, the Council observes, they will be enabled to "gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility in striving endlessly to form their own lives properly and in pursuing true freedom" (Declaration on Christian Education, 1).

The Council's directives not only apply Jesus' own example but they are based on the traditional fact that God's commanding voice is not heard only or even chiefly in laws. His voice can be recognized as well in the confused voices of experience, in the signs of our times, in the values most highly prized in the contemporary world (Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 4).



Father Pfeifer says that giving our children responsibility is one of the best ways of educating them.

Conscience, The Church And You

By FR. KEVIN O'ROURKE, OP

Is there a new understanding in the Church concerning the role of conscience in the life of a Christian? Does the Document on Religious Liberty of Vatican Council II represent a greater recognition of freedom of the individual conscience? Does the debate concerning the Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, signify a new approach to the relationship between authority and the individual conscience?

Basically, the theology concerning the conscience of the individual person, his freedom and responsibilities, has not changed. Today's theologians uphold the truths found in the teaching of Christ and explained in the letters of St. Paul.

Conscience, the power which enables us to judge good and evil in particular circumstances, is still considered to be the concrete and personal norm for human action. Though personal and fundamental, conscience is not the ultimate and supreme norm of human action. Theologians still hold that the supreme norm is "divine wisdom, or the eternal law, which directs all actions to their due end." The task of the individual then, is to conform the conscience with the mind of God.

Since God speaks to us through his Son, the Church and other people, the obligation to respect and listen to the teaching of Christ, the Church, and to seek the advice of wise and competent friends when forming one's conscience, still remains. Freedom of conscience is freedom to find the truth, not freedom to act independently of Christ, the Church and our friends.

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Moreover, theologians realize that people still can err in forming conscience, willingly or unwillingly. Hence, the constant battle to avoid self-deception in forming conscience is part of the human scene. Docility, mortification, and prayer, which lessen the possibility of self-deception, are still important parts of the complex act of forming a Christian conscience.

If the teaching of the Church is still the same, why has the Church changed so many laws, and taken different attitudes towards those who do not agree with Catholic teaching? Why, for example, did the Church make it easier for non-Catholics to marry Catholics?

First of all, there is a greater emphasis upon love than upon law as a norm for forming conscience. Law is a valid extrinsic norm for forming conscience, something to be considered and respected. But love is even more important. Love as a norm of conscience is not a self-seeking or pleasure-oriented force. Rather, it is willingness to listen to God's voice, to seek his friendship, especially as he reveals himself or speaks to us through the persons and events of our daily lives. Such love is a drive to service and to sacrifice for other people, even if it means discomfort and suffering.

Emphasizing love rather than law as a moral norm challenges us to surpass the basic minimum in our Christian life. This is the meaning of the famous dictum, "love and do as you will"; if your love is genuine, your conscience will be free and true, and you will not only

fulfill the law, you will surpass it.

Because love must predominate, the Church is willing to repeal many unimportant laws, such as the laws concerning abstinence from meat on Fridays and the communion fast, in an effort to evoke a more sincere motivation of love.

Greater emphasis upon the dignity of the individual human person also leads to some practical changes in the Church's policy and law. The Church's renewed view of non-Catholic Churches and religious liberty is a result of a deeper recognition of the worth of individual persons. If individuals are of great worth in the sight of God, if they are called to communion with him, and if they are to be respected as his creatures, then even if they do not possess the full truth, the truth and goodness they do possess must be respected.

A third emphasis affecting the formation of conscience today is based on the realization that moral decisions are very complex and laws cannot be given to cover every situation. Sometimes there are conflicting moral values. Therefore, the Church is less inclined to give specific, detailed instructions as it did in the past, and relies more on motivational instructions. This approach demands Catholics develop a mature Christian conscience, imbued with love of Christ and the spirit of the Gospels.

In sum, then, there has been development in the teaching on conscience, but not radical change. The development is meant to help Catholics adjust to the needs of our times and to lead full Christian lives.

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Q. You recently indicated that the whole Church, and not just its priests and Religious, is called to Christian holiness. But isn't "holiness" a rather elusive term? Liberals, conservatives, and middle-of-the-roads alike would undoubtedly agree that we should all strive for holiness. What does it really mean, however?

A. Holiness is the most basic requirement of the Christian life. Apart from it, no project, program, or policy of the Church can achieve final success.

In the past, however, we may have too often confused "holiness" with various forms of narrow-mindedness, puritanical or Jansenistic behavior, scrupulosity, introversion, or any number of psychological aberrations. We may have, in fact, canonized mental illness and scorned the healthy and the mature under the guise of condemning selfishness, pride, arrogance, or irreverence.

In Sacred Scripture, and particularly in the Old Testament, holiness is portrayed as an essential quality of God. Holiness is that which makes God what he is. And, as St. John assures us, God is love.

Throughout the history of Israel, God manifested his holiness by his righteousness, his disdain for and judgment upon sin, his merciful deliverance of his people from dangers and misfortunes, and by his constancy and fidelity to the covenant which he established with them.

And man is holy insofar as he shares in this essential reality of God, which is love. Holiness cannot be limited, therefore to specifically religious activity.

Israel did not show forth its holiness through worship alone. Its holiness was always related to its task in history. Israel was a holy nation because it was a people set apart by God's choice in order to fulfill a special mission in the world.

In the New Testament the quality of holiness is applied directly to the Church (1 Peter 2:9), and in the Acts of the Apostles the Christian community is referred to as "the saints." The Church receives this holiness through faith, baptism, union with Christ, and through the righteousness which results from such union (Rom 6:19).

But the primary effect of Christian holiness is the meeting of Christian moral standards. As we are, so we must act. And holiness is necessary for the Christian community if it expects to hasten the day when God's Kingdom will be realized throughout all of creation (2 Peter 3:11).

Thus, the Church manifests its holiness when it faithfully executes its mission to proclaim, to signify, and to facilitate the reign and rule of God in the world. And the individual member of the Church manifests his holiness by an active and uncompromising participation in the mission of the entire Christian community.

Holiness, therefore, is not exclusively, nor even primarily, a matter of code and cult — of observing ecclesiastical laws and of giving worship to God at certain prescribed times. Holiness may indeed be measured by the number of moments spent in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, but it is just as likely to be measured by the moments spent with a sick or troubled friend.

Holiness may be measured by the discreet and respectful silence in the face of unjust criticism or reprisals, but it is at least as likely to be measured by one's frank and outspoken denunciation of social injustice, wherever and by whomever it may be practiced.

Holiness is wholeness, to use the phrase of the Catholic writer, Josef Goldbrunner. The one who is most fully human is the one who most closely approximates the holiness of God. It is the free and mature man who is the holy man. And he is both free and mature because he is not ruled by ambition, superstition, mythologies, prejudice, self-centeredness, or arrogance. And he is holy because he is genuinely free — liberated from these multiple forms of slavery by the One who came to set all men free.

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