

America's Spiritual Strength

By Religious News Service

The so-called crisis in morality for the nation today may not be any worse than the moral woes of other generations, but the scope of its exposure and the consequent reaction have been unprecedented.

With the Watergate scandals, the drug scene, crime and violence, poverty, racism, sexual and behavioral permissiveness, some religious observers see a justification for their contention that these situations are surface aspects of a "pervasive secularism" that seeks to supplant the nation's religious heritage.

"Spiritual hunger," a "general lowering of morality," "modern abuses of the moral law," are a few of the phrases used to describe what has become for many on the nation's religious scene evidence of the "moral disintegration" of America, or a disenchantment — if not a total break — with religious and transcendental value structures.

One expert on Christian ethics, Father Georges Tavard, Roman Catholic moral theologian, has pointed out that moral dilemmas are intensifying with respect to medicine, research, social planning, business and political policy-making.

He has made a plea for serious interreligious dialogue on moral and ethical questions on the level of what is "ethically normative" in the light of a particular church's beliefs, and he has declared that the churches should initiate a cooperative approach to moral questions facing society today.

Father Tavard also urged a "reassessment" by the churches of the "divergences in practical ethics manifested in daily life by the Christians of this country."

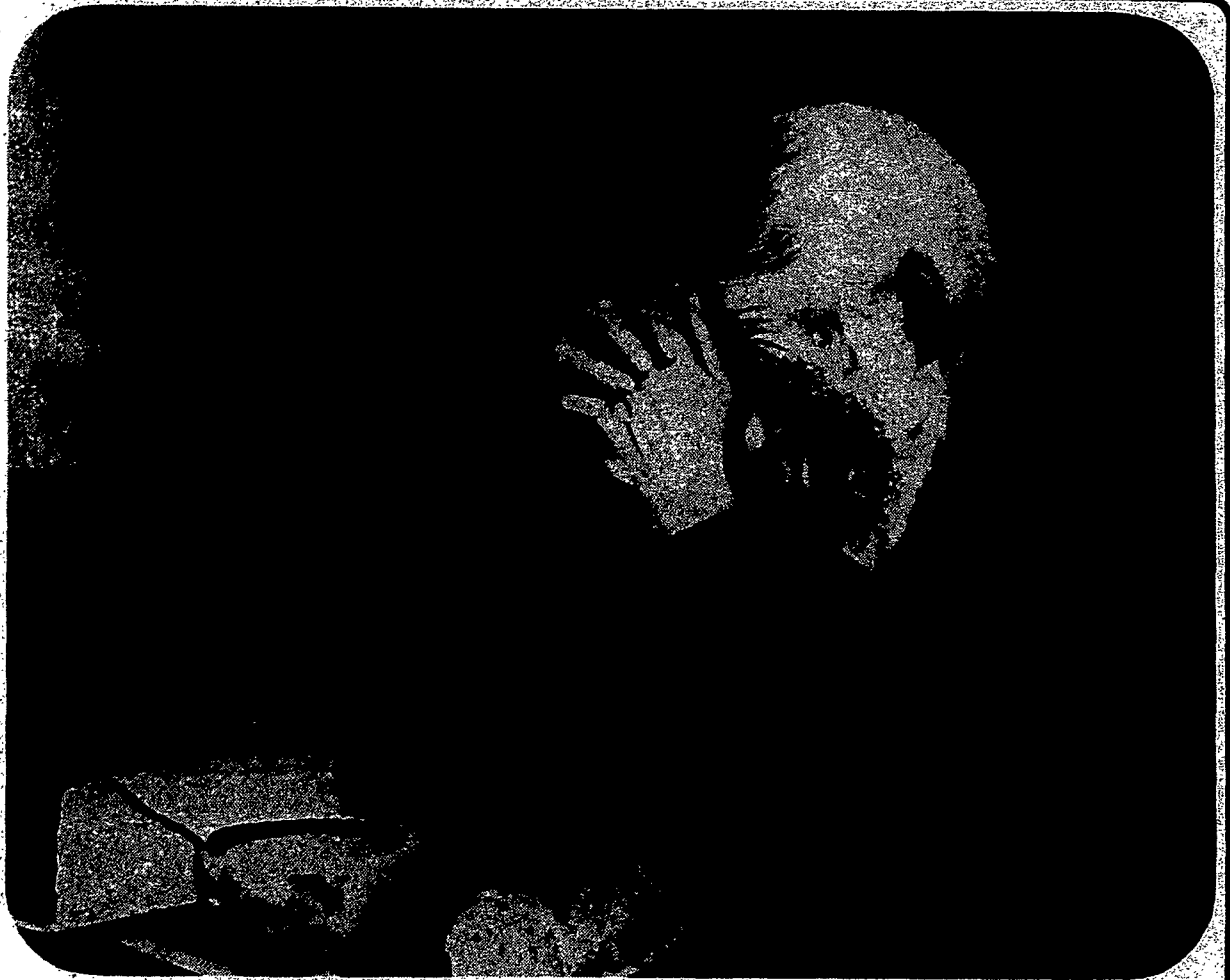
In its proposal for religious education for children attending public schools, the administrative board of the U.S. Catholic Conference recently expressed the view that there is a connection between the lack of instruction in religious and moral values and the increase in crime and violence committed by young people.

The board also voiced its concern over the possible "imposition, through the power of the state, of values hostile to one's faith or moral precepts."

A National Council of Churches' aide, testifying before a U.S. Senate hearing on the family, said the "old-fashioned" moral values of love, honor, honesty and fidelity, especially in marriage, are fundamental to a "healthy society."

The Rev. William Genne, the NCC's director for family ministries, said "many religionists have the feeling that God is at work exposing cynicism and arrogance" and reminding Americans of moral values.

Earlier in the same hearing, anthropologist Margaret Mead, an Episcopal laywoman, asserted that morally and ethically "this country is in terrible disarray. Richest and strongest of nations we may be, but we seem to have lost any concern for those who are young or weak, old or poor."



Grace, by noted American photographer Eric Enstrom [1876-1968].

Many Churchmen Find Evidence of a National Moral Disintegration

Many blame the current crisis in morality on secular humanism, which is generally viewed as the antithesis of religiously-based morality.

The recent publication of an updated Humanist Manifesto, a 4,000-word document issued by an international group of 120 philosophers, activists, agnostics and atheists, stirred a hostile reaction in religious circles because of its advocacy of moral values that stem only from human experience. The Knights of Columbus magazine editorially attacked the new manifesto, charging that it is a "direct negation" of the Ten Commandments and reflects the extent to which "agnostic secularism" has permeated this nation's philosophy.

The organization's publication said the document could not be dismissed lightly because its philosophy has "infected" substantial areas of American life, particularly the universities and the courts. It said the humanist philosophy "has gutted the moral and religious foundations which undergird American society."

Dr. Jude Dougherty, dean of the Catholic University of America School of Philosophy, said that "while sounding a high moral tone," the manifesto does not deal at all "with personal moral growth," indicating that it reflects many of the moral deficiencies found in today's society.

In another direction, a U.S. Congressman who is also a Catholic priest, Rep. Robert F. Drinan, SJ, told a Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ, that churchmen must emerge from their sanctuaries and infuse the nation's secular and political life with desperately needed "moral" leadership.

He urged strong participation by religious leaders in political and social life to "carry into public life those moral and spiritual norms which are common to all religions in America and . . . from the moral consensus on which American democracy was founded."

Earlier this year, Rep. Charles E. Bennett, a member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), introduced a bill calling for federal grants to public schools "to carry on programs teaching moral and ethical principles."

In delving into the Watergate scandals, several religious figures contributing to a symposium published by The Christian Century magazine generally held that Watergate shows the degree to which power can corrupt in a society where transcendental spirituality has become an empty shell.

Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, retired general secretary of the World Council of Churches, specifically connected the abuse of power in Watergate with the decline in morality. He said:

"Our culture now seems equally to lack the hopeful vision of the deists among the founding fathers and the pessimistic realism of believing in a universal need for repentance unto life of the Calvinists among them. So we find ourselves with the arrogant hypocrisy of a national faith without any moral or spiritual benefits from it."

While the general solution to the overall question of decline in moral values is usually contained in a call to spiritual rejuvenation, both on individual and national levels, the exact ingredients of renewal and reconciliation are often difficult to pin down.

In his new book, *The Fire We Can Light*, Dr. Martin E. Marty of the University of Chicago Divinity School, notes the sudden changes in the world of the 1970s and seeks to pinpoint a role for religion in the midst of moral dilemmas.

He sees the situation as calling for "a strange blend of Christian humanism and prophecy," so there resides in each person a dual responsibility for the worldly and spiritual aspects of life. He added that the "creative tension" produced could offer a "new vision, new consciousness, a new world, the spark of a new fire we can light in a dark age."

Calls for Spiritual Renewal Of National and Personal Life Are Being Issued