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Faith Today

The life and death of a Gadfly

By Sister Prudence Allén RSM
NC News Service

Socrates believed he had been called by the deity to be a new kind of philosopher. Living some 2,400 years ago in the Greek city of Athens, he challenged others to think about human integrity.

Socrates said: "Where God posted me...with the duty to be a philosopher and to test myself and others, it would be strange if there I would fear either death or anything else and desert my post."

This remarkable man, often called the father of Western philosophy, remained faithful to his mission until his death.

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Socrates recognized that human actions often reveal a lack of personal integrity. He set about showing how a person will say one thing and do another, or hold one set of values in mind while acting by other values.

Plato recorded what his teacher, Socrates, had to say. "If any of you argues the point and says he does take every care, I will question him, and if I think he does not possess virtue but only says so, I will show that he sets very little value on things most precious."

Comparing himself to a gadfly that constantly buzzes around a horse, Socrates challenged others without regard to their social class or political position:

"This I will do for everyone I meet, young or old, native or foreigner. For this is what God commands me, make no mistake."

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When we speak of personal integrity we are speaking about a movement toward unity, oneness or completeness within a person.

Socrates was vigilant in carrying out his call to challenge others to greater personal integrity. But his vigilance infuriated those Athenians who were leading hypocritical lives. They had him arrested and brought to trial on three false charges: He was corrupting youth, he was an atheist



and he illegally accepted money for his teaching.

The charge of Socrates' so-called "corruption of the youth" came about because he taught young people how to discover the hypocrisy of the leaders in Athens.

His so-called "atheism" came from his belief in the divinity who

gave him his mission, rather than the many gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus who were held sacred by Greek society at that time.

To the charge that he illegally accepted money for his teaching, Socrates answered: "My accusers had not the effrontery or ability to produce a single witness to

testify that I ever exacted or asked for a fee: and I produce, I think, the sufficient witness that I speak the truth, my poverty."

In other words, Socrates believed that his life of simple poverty revealed his personal freedom from greed. His actions were consistent with his values.

The rulers of Athens, however, were so determined to rid themselves of Socrates' penetrating questions that they voted to condemn him to death.

Then, while Socrates was awaiting execution, his disciple Crito tried to convince him to escape. But Socrates remained true to his own principles. For he held a belief that the state gave him life, sustenance and education, and therefore had the right to determine when his life should end.

To Crito, Socrates said: "We must not do wrong in return or do evil to anyone in the world however we may be treated by them. Then let it be...since in this way God is leading us."

Socrates accepted his death peacefully.

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Socrates lived hundreds of years before Christ. Yet it's striking how compatible his witness is in many ways with that of Christ.

Jesus often pressed his disciples toward greater personal integrity, challenging them to make their acts consistent with their deepest values.

And today, Pope John Paul II has given a philosophical and theological framework for understanding the call of Christians to personal integrity in his book, "The Acting Person." He agrees that people must be challenged to have their actions correspond with higher values.

The pope writes: "For us, action reveals the person and we look at the person through his action. Action gives us the best insight into the inherent essence of the person and allows us to understand the person most fully."

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LENT Where God posted me, said Socrates, there I will remain. This philosopher, writes Sister Prudence Allén, strove for consistency — to go in accord with his beliefs. His was a life and death of integrity.