

Learning to be wise

common opinion."

Wisdom is not an attribute reserved to the aged, Moore said. A young person making choices based on deeper values could be considered wise.

People "can make decisions responding to external pressures," he said, or they can make decisions based on what really seems to fit with the way they see the world, their values.

Moore thinks decisions based on one's real values are practical in the long run. Ultimately they bring happiness and peace.

Patricia Davis defines wisdom as the capacity "to discern the truth and then apply it in a way that is loving."

Ms. Davis is a Washington, D.C., addictions counselor who also has an advanced degree in theology.

Some wisdom is a gift, Ms. Davis said. "There are people who are natural reconcilers, who can almost instinctively find common ground and begin to build bridges."

But part of wisdom can be learned, she added.

One way people open themselves to wisdom is by "getting in touch with people who have gone before us," realizing that "every one of us doesn't start fresh in life."

It also takes "a certain amount of life experience" to become wise, she said, although aging doesn't necessarily imply wisdom.

Among the marks of a wise person are "less grasping, more

gratitude, the appreciation that everything in life is a gift," Ms. Davis said.

Father Eugene Hemrick, U.S. Catholic Conference research director, describes wisdom as a combination of knowledge and good experience.

It involves "being with one's own interior values — the Greek meaning of the word for conscience," Father Hemrick said. Conscience is "an inner sense that knows what's important, what matters."

Wisdom brings a sense of "peace, tranquility, wholeness, a coming together" in life. Father Hemrick believes it can readily be seen in people who have grown old gracefully and people who have bowed out of the limelight gracefully.

But growth in wisdom doesn't just happen. It requires intention, Father Hemrick said.

Education and contemplation — "working things out in one's own mind, thinking things through without distraction" — can foster wisdom. So can listening to the wisdom in adages and stories passed from generation to generation.

Wisdom can come, too, when people are able to recognize and break out of unhealthy situations they are locked into — narrow patterns or "one-track thinking" — and learn from their mistakes, Father Hemrick observed.

(Ms. Liebhart is media reporter for NC News Service.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Who is really wise?

Paulist Father James Young associates wisdom with persons who "reflect on life and can communicate that reflection to others in concrete and pointed ways." He is rector of St. Paul's Seminary in Washington, D.C.

Another characteristic of wisdom for Father Young is humility. Truly wise persons have a sense of modesty about their accomplishments and experiences. They would shy away from calling themselves wise, he thinks.

A wise person is quite different from those who "have something to say on everything" and try to force their opinion on others, he said. That's not wisdom.

Wise individuals have a knack for presenting truths in "gentle and alluring" terms, Father Young continued. They realize that there's no need to force people to listen to them. They know the "truth can stand on its own two feet," he noted.

Asked to point to some people he considers wise, Father Young mentioned two:

—A Paulist priest, now in his mid-60s, who taught Father Young philosophy. This priest "can give me lessons" that grow out of all the years he has lived and reflected on his experiences, Father Young explained.

This priest is an effective "problem solver," Father Young continued. He sees situations in ways that help others to consider their problems in a new light and thus to discover solutions they hadn't thought of before.

—Pope John XXIII because he "had an understanding of the human condition and an optimistic view of life." Father Young added that this beloved pope was "exposed to the human condition at its worst and yet was still able to see God's presence in life."

How is wisdom in a person identified?

Father Young points out that wisdom is a highly attractive quality in a person. In choosing a spiritual director, for instance, people gravitate toward someone "with wisdom and insight," the priest said. We look for "persons who have something to say" to our particular situation.

At the same time, there is a task for wisdom that should not go unrecognized — the task of drawing out the wisdom in others. Father Young observed that spiritual directors sometimes explain their task in terms of drawing out "the wisdom in each individual" — helping others to see God and hear God's voice "speaking in them."

Gee whiz-dom

This was the wisdom Paul preached.

However, some Corinthians found it hard to accept his message completely. It ran against what they considered wise.

Oh, they were enthusiastic about the Resurrection — as they interpreted it. It fed their ego. They could consider themselves "risen," above the petty concerns of ordinary human beings.

They were "spiritual," and so considered their bodies morally neutral. They could eat and drink as they pleased, sleep with whomever they wanted. What difference did it make to superior beings like them?

Paul was well aware of this attitude. He confronted it directly: "When I came to you I did not come proclaiming God's testimony with any particular eloquence or 'wisdom.'...My message and my preaching had none of the persuasive force of wise argumentation, but the convincing power of the Spirit." (1 Cor. 2:1,4)

Was Paul anti-intellectual? Quite the contrary!

Paul was an intellectual giant, a true genius, a pioneer theologian. But he was wise enough to realize the inadequacy of philosophy to bring genuine happiness.

The wisdom proposed by Paul surpassed, but did not neglect, human knowledge.

This wisdom was paradoxical; it pointed to the cross as the necessary ingredient for true human fulfillment. This was "a stumbling block to the Jews, and an absurdity to the Gentiles." But, Paul wrote, "God's folly is wiser than men." (1 Cor. 1:23-25)

Paul applied the paradoxical wisdom of the Word (Wisdom) made flesh: "Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will preserve it." (Mark 8:35)

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

...for discussion

1. Think of someone you consider wise. What makes that person wise in your opinion? Is it the way the person thinks? Is it something the person does? Is it because of some way the person has influenced you or someone else?

2. Is there much of a need for wisdom in a typical daily life? If so, what are some points when it is needed?

3. Do you agree with Daniel Medinger when he says "wisdom's burden is a discomfoting thought?"

4. Do you think a young person can be wise? Or is wisdom reserved chiefly for people who have lived a long life?

SECOND HELPINGS

The Bible: Its Heroes and Its Message, by Marilyn Norquist. Learning about biblical events and people like Amos and Elijah and Philip can be a kind of mental hook which can help Christians today understand better the ways of God with human beings, writes the author in this 96-page book. The story of Gideon in the Old Testament, for instance, teaches that "the Lord worked through human weakness so that his saving action might be clearly recognized." Ms. Norquist goes on to note that biblical people "were aware that God is a mystery for us, that infinity cannot be probed by our little minds" completely. And they also "felt a great need to know what God desired of them and whether he noticed them or cared for them." (Liguori Publications, One Liguori Dr., Liguori, Mo. 63057, \$2.95.)