

# Liturgy — molder of conscience

By Katharine Bird  
NC News Service

The Eucharist gives Christians "a sense of who we are, to whom we belong and for whom we are responsible," said Gabe Huck.

It provides an ongoing lesson in "how a community acts now and what things the community thinks about and argues about. These all help form our consciences," Huck added. The religious educator, director of Liturgy Training Publications in the Archdiocese of Chicago, was speaking in a recent interview about the conscience and how it develops.

In a church context, he continued, the conscience concerns the ways "an individual receives and internalizes and practices the norms for justice received from the Scriptures and tradition."

What we hear in Scripture is reinforced by what we see happening in "the lives of people in the Christian tradition and handed down to us from generation to generation," he added.

For Huck, the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on peace and their proposed pastoral on the U.S. economy are "outstanding" recent examples of this process at work. The pastorals reveal the bishops and many others struggling "to understand issues and what directions to point us in," he explained.

The pastorals display a "shift, a growth in how we understand our

responsibility for others," Huck said. "Conscience has certainly been raised, but where it leads is not clear yet."

Asked how the Eucharist helps form consciences, the religious educator observed that the different parts of the liturgy each play a role.

•In the Liturgy of the Word, we hear the same scripture stories repeated again and again. Every Easter Vigil service, for instance, starts with the well-known creation story.

The story "speaks of the sacredness of creation. It tells us that God sees everything he created is good," Huck said. And it's "terribly relevant to our lives now at the end of the 20th century."

That story gradually "shapes the way we approach creation," he said. It points Christians to ask themselves, "Do we have that attitude? Do we act that way?" Huck remarked.

In the community setting, he suggested, that story can take on different meaning for people at different phases throughout their lives.

•The consciences of Christians also are shaped by the homily, Huck said. Here, the homilist endeavors to bring out the meaning of the readings for a particular people at this time and in this place.

•Then, in the intercessory prayers, Christians are reminded that "they can't be unmindful of others, that it's the task of the baptized person" to be concerned about others beyond individual and parish needs.

These prayers "take up what is crying out for help in the world," Huck said. Examples might be: those suffering because of drought and famine in Africa, the plight of refugees and those in prison.

"The liturgy is for the long haul," Huck observed. It doesn't lead to conversion every week. But occasionally people are motivated by the liturgy to take some concrete action in response to another's needs.

"We gather for liturgies and learn what it means to be a baptized person," he added. "Little by little the liturgy teaches us what shape we believe the world should have."

It tells us "there are no privileged people here, no ranks or classes or degrees," Huck said. "It speaks of the great dignity of all gathering around the common table."

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

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

# FOOD...

...for thought

Every day after school, the 12-year-old came home and went immediately to his room. There he stayed for hours, listless and uncaring. Each day it became harder and harder for his mother to persuade him to get out of bed and go to school.

In school the boy's teachers reported that he was losing interest in the classes and his grades were plummeting. During recess and lunch time, the boy sat by himself taking little if any interest in the games and conversation of his classmates.

The boy's mother worried that her son's blue mood would sink into apathy. She and the boy's father decided in consultation with his teachers to take some positive steps to help the boy shake off the blahs.

What is apathy?

Webster's New World Dictionary defines apathy as being "without emotion." The dictionary applies the term to people who have a "lack of interest, a listless condition, a lack of concern."

Individuals who are apathetic run the risk of remaining outside the mainstream of life. In holding themselves aloof, they can stunt the growth of their consciences and deaden themselves to the sufferings and joys of others.

When you think about it, apathy ought to be foreign to Christians. Followers of Christ are called to be passionately interested in others. They are invited to let their moral sensitivities grow by caring about God, about each other, about the world they live in and about themselves.

Weekly the liturgy reminds Christians what kind of people they are to be. The Eucharist celebrated in community says that each individual has value; it urges them to recognize that what they do matters and can make a difference in the world.

"There is no such thing as 'spiritual life' or 'life in Christ' apart from all the relationships that make up human life in the communities in which we live and serve," said Father John Egan in a 1983 speech on liturgy and justice at Boston College. He is the director of the Chicago archdiocesan office of human relations and ecumenism.

The liturgy reminds individuals that they can't allow themselves to become apathetic to others. "For those who participate, the liturgy expresses their continuing struggle to be one with each other in Christ and gives them energy and strength to carry that struggle in the midst of daily life," Father Egan said.

...for discussion

1. Do you think that one's moral vision and one's capacity to act as a morally concerned person can grow throughout life?

2. Can you think of an event in your life or a period during your life when your sense of what it means to live a moral life grew? What or who stimulated this growth? Are there aspects of your life today that are stimulating a greater awareness of all that the moral life can be?

3. What do you think the word "conscience" means?

4. In the article by Katharine Bird, Gabe Huck suggests that the church's liturgy can foster the growth of moral awareness among people. How does this happen?

## SECOND HELPINGS

"Living with Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion," edited by Tilden Edwards. Developing a sense of compassion for the needs, worries and sufferings of others is vital for those who want to create a more just world. And this includes getting to know yourself better, writes Jesuit Father John Haughey. He suggests that those who don't know themselves can cause pain, perhaps unwittingly, in their treatment of others. By getting to know themselves, Christians "can reduce or eliminate the social tension, hostility or violence" they themselves cause, he adds. The book includes articles on Scripture, theology, history and the family by such authors as Father Henri Nouwen, Trappist Father Basil Pennington, Rosemary Haughton and Dolores Leckey. (Harper and Row, 10 E. 53 St., New York, N.Y. 10022. \$14.95.)