

Opinions

Catechist emphasizes importance of compassion in religious education

To the Editor:

I am still receiving calls and notes regarding Jeanne Gehret's interview with me (C-J "School Days" supplement, Aug. 14: "Catechist enjoys helping children learn and love the faith"). Most of the people (who call or write) ask me how some of the issues raised in the article had been resolved. They ask, "What became of the woman referred to as 'distracted' that she could not have her baby baptized?" The good news is that the child was baptized with an entire class of children encircling the family during a Sunday liturgy. That might never have happened if her older child's religion teacher had not phoned the mother to tell her that she missed Mary. The mother's tearful response about being in a second marriage and not being able to have her infant baptized set into motion compassionate relationships, an annulment process and a second marriage blessed by the Church.

Many people have also questioned the article's reference to an alcoholic in the family or a divorce as reasons parents seem unresponsive to a religious-education program. While such problems cause some people to hang back, sit in the last pew, come late, leave early or not come at all, we also find that they eventually come to greatly appreciate the hospitable faith community. Actually, what we find time and time again is that parish programs provide steps toward inner healing. Divorced people, alcoholics

and others are welcomed with open arms into parish programs, and generally they find them to be a "breath of fresh air."

A vital part of religious education today is working with a great variety of family situations and loving (people) through their difficulties. The major focus is in equipping people to recognize and celebrate God's love in every aspect of their lives. That's developing a biblical perspective. Every child in these classes has a Bible, and many parents are praying with scripture daily. One of our popular sessions at St. Rita's is our Bible Fair, in which every child proclaims, illustrates or dramatizes a scripture passage. Our goal is to form a people who live God's Word.

We have a long way to go, but it is essential that your readers know that people are not excluded just because they seem unresponsive. A lack of response on the part of some families should motivate the catechist to depend upon God and reach out with love. If anyone finds a situation in which such care is lacking, I urge him or her to volunteer to teach or work in a parish religious-education office or lead a confirmation group. By modeling the compassionate attitude we want our parish to demonstrate, we will discover how contagious Christ's compassion is.

Denise Mack
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Pro-life choice clear in gubernatorial race

To the Editor:

Three Catholics are running for governor this November. If we are serious about Cardinal Bernardin's "seamless-garment approach" to life issues, we have a responsibility to know where (these candidates) stand.

Governor Cuomo, a Democrat, opposes the death penalty but condones abortion and puts money in the budget each year to kill the unborn children of the poor.

O'Rourke, a Republican, supports the death penalty but opposes abortion.

Denis Dillon, Right to Life Party candidate, opposes both the death penalty for criminals and the death penalty for the unborn — abortion.

Pro-lifers who oppose both forms of killing have no problem (deciding) who to vote for, but pro-lifers who want to make sure Cuomo is defeated for the good of unborn children have a dilemma. If Cuomo

can be beaten, only O'Rourke can do it.

Unfortunately, all the polls and pundits show that Cuomo is running far ahead and is, in reality, unbeatable. In that case, it only makes sense to support the candidate whose vote total will send the politicians — including Cuomo — the message that all human life is sacred. A vote for Denis Dillon, Nassau County district attorney, and for the Right to Life Party is a clear, identifiable vote for life.

Anyone who wants more information on Denis Dillon, who is willing to help distribute flyers, or who wishes to view a video tape of Dillon leading pickets outside Bill Baird's abortion chamber on Long Island and debating Baird on television can contact me at (315)539-8860.

Don Peters
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Editorial

Farewell to an unlikely friend

The Courier-Journal suffered a great loss last week with the death of one of its most-ardent letter writers. John J. Clark III of Wayland passed away Friday, August 29, in the Buffalo Veterans' Administration Hospital.

Mr. Clark had been what one might term an amiable adversary of mine since I wrote my first Courier-Journal editorial, which appeared in the issue of April 17, 1985.

Mr. Clark and I neither met nor spoke to each other during my 1½-year tenure at the C-J, but to some degree, I feel I had come to know him. From the moment of opening one of his epistles, I could tell what he was up to. If the letter began "Madame Editor," he was going to taunt me for one of my liberal viewpoints, which he doubtless attributed to my youth and gender. If, however, the salutation was, "Dear Editor," someone else was to be the target, and I could breathe a sigh of relief.

In my first months as editor, when I was new to the C-J and to the uncomfortable task of writing editorials, I often took umbrage at Mr. Clark's biting rebuttals to my views. Later, however, I began to look forward to his lively commentary, and learned to take his letters in a spirit of friendly banter and ideological debate. I optimistically believe that is the spirit in which he intended them.

Though his sarcasm often struck a nerve or two, I began to wish for the opportunity to meet Mr. Clark — to discuss the many areas of our disagreement and to exchange some of the

experiences that had shaped our disparate views. Perhaps, I speculated, we'd also find that there were a number of issues on which we'd wholeheartedly agree.

Father Paul Schnacky, who informed us of Mr. Clark's death, seems to have read my mind. In his letter, Father Schnacky wrote: "Despite the tone of his letters, I think you would have enjoyed meeting him. He was a product of the old Church; he believed what he had been taught by priests, brothers and sisters whose sacrificial lives gave expression to that teaching. His military experience and contact with cultures other than our own added a dimension to his belief that is lacking in my own. He always entered a discussion with a twinkle in his eye."

"I just thought you might like to have a bit of a personal portrait of him," Father Schnacky continued. "I think we have to listen to the John Clarks of our Church. The old Church formed and fashioned them. They suffered much in living out their faith, and in defending it."

Still wishing I'd had an opportunity to see the twinkle in Mr. Clark's eye as he wrote one of his many letters to the editor, I'm resolved to remember Father Schnacky's closing remarks: "This bit of tribute to John Clark is more a reminder to myself not to let these people depart without treasuring the gift of wisdom shared, especially by those who nurtured and refined that wisdom by long years and much life experience."

Farewell Mr. Clark. We will miss you.

'Heart went out' to those who protested 'Hail Mary'

To the Editor:

Father William Lum, University of Rochester's Catholic chaplain, "reflected" that the protests of the film "Hail Mary" were not justified (C-J, Aug. 28: "Catholic chaplain reflects on recent UR showing of film 'Hail Mary'"). His defense of the university's decision is understandable since he is affiliated there. However, as a Catholic and a priest, it is not understandable, especially in light of our Holy Father's condemnation of it as blasphemous.

Although I was not a protester, my heart and thoughts went out to them. Their protest was merely an overt action against the movie makers and institutions that make a profit from violating the Mother of God's honor. The protesters could not sit by idly and let this happen. I'm sure Jesus in heaven was moved at the sight of his little ones coming forth to His Mother's defense.

Protesting in defense of Jesus's Mother's honor may not be as chic as other protests, but is certainly as valid and important. I hope Father Lum, in his spirit of openness and dialogue, is not chaplain at the U of R the day they decide to show "Uncle Tom's Cabin." They both may be in for more than they can handle.

Stephen J. Fisher
Honeoye Falls #6 Road, Honeoye Falls

Disagrees with UR chaplain

To the Editor:

I disagree with Father Lum and all others who "trumpet" the cause of academic freedom and who refrain from supporting those who are protesting the showing of the blasphemous film, "Hail Mary."

Frank Kinsky
Lochnavar Parkway
Pittsford

Victor Bartolotta Jr.

A Closer Look



A quality of mercy

"I feel that death is a little severe for something that was a mistake," said convicted killer Randy Lynn Woolls, 36, right before the state of Texas executed him for a crime he claims he unknowingly committed under the influence of drugs. How apt is Woolls' summary of the old adage "the punishment doesn't fit the crime" — a dilemma that exists in both secular and religious institutions?

In Jesus' era, adulterers were punished by execution. Did the punishment of death fit the crime of adultery? Jesus didn't think so, and that is why he challenged those who could publicly admit they were without sin to cast the first stone. No one came forward. Perhaps each person could admit at least to himself or herself that committing adultery or sinning was a possibility.

History is replete with examples of people who have suffered because they received punishment too severe for the offense. The protagonist in Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables* is one example of this. The man who stole a loaf of bread because he was hungry was hounded his entire life by an authority eager to bring him to supposed justice. What great injustice!

Institutions are notorious for meting out

punishment that is often too severe and simply does not fit the crime. The rationale behind such behavior is that institutions must do what is necessary to maintain their status and their power and must resist all threats to their existence.

Among the institutions that have developed a strong system of defense for positive and negative reasons alike is the Catholic Church. Of course, the Western Church was battered quite severely during the Reformation. As a result, Catholics have the Reformation to thank for much of the church's existing structure and rigidity.

Before the Reformation, Christian mystery and faith were lived out and experienced rather than articulated. After the Reformation, however, such doctrines as transubstantiation and the specific number of sacraments were formulated to combat a wave of assault on the Catholic faith. Naturally, the Reformation produced a number of positive changes which in the long run helped to purify the Church.

When we compare the institution of the Church to secular institutions, we discover one paramount difference between the two. Above all, the Church ought to be distin-

guished from other institutions by its emphasis on love: that is, the Church possesses supernatural love, which comes from God and which colors in a positive and pervasive way everything that the Church does in the world. This is the hallmark of the Church.

Jesus said, "All will know you are my disciples because of your love for one another." The love God gives to believers through his Son is a special love, a love not of this world, a love which gives witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Secular institutions make no claims of this nature.

It is in the context of Christian love that theologians describe the Church as a community of believers permanently dedicated to each other and to God. The Church has an obligation to support and challenge its members, and above all, to guarantee that any punishment conceivably due a member is administered under the auspices of love. Love is the overall guiding principle, because it is through love that the dignity of the individual is safeguarded. Our dignity as human beings directly stems from God, in whose image we are created.

In fact, it is also the Church's responsibility to safeguard the dignity and rights of other people in society, including the rights of those who may not even be Church members. This is why the Church acts as an advocate for the rights of the unborn, the accused and workers, among other groups.

In spite of this work of advocacy, it is worth noting how difficult it is for either an institution or an individual to impose the standards to which we ask others to adhere. No institution censures itself easily. But the

Church, as the premier institution in the world because of its unique relationship with God, must conduct itself and all its affairs — in particular those involving the admonition of its members — under the guiding principle of love.

If love is used as a guiding principle, the situation will guarantee that the punishment will fit the crime. Love and reason are the overall guidelines that should be used in administering justice.

Without love, the Church and other institutions risk the possibility of injustice. When that situation occurs, the manner in which an errant person or group of people is reprimanded becomes more important than the reason for the correction.

The cliché about throwing the baby out with the bathwater is a case in point. When the punishment doesn't fit the crime, we can become justifiably more sympathetic to those who made the mistake than to the institution doling out the punishment.

As Catholics, we may need to remind ourselves that *how* correction is best recommended is sometimes more important than the reason for punishment itself. Sometimes, just sometimes, average Catholics have to challenge the Church in all its aspects, to implement a quality of mercy commensurate with divine love when administering correction and reproof.

When we can do this, we will guarantee that the punishment will fit the crime, that people will know that we are followers of Jesus because of our love, and that, for those with whom we do not agree or whom we wish to correct, there will always exist a quality of mercy.