

Different methods lead to variable solutions

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated Columnist

The bishops call it a "consistent ethic of life." The media prefer a vivid metaphor, the "seamless garment."

However one names it, the reality is an interlocking network of moral values and teachings that are bound together by a reverence for human life at every level.

But at first glance, the United States Catholic bishops' teachings on sexual and social morality seem inconsistent, not consistent.

The bishops are conservative on matters of sexual morality (contraception, abortion, *in vitro* fertilization, sterilization, homosexuality, divorce), and liberal on matters of social morality (unionization, military policy, governmental assistance to the poor, capital punishment, nuclear deterrence, human rights).

Thus, the bishops are opposed to the use

of condoms to help prevent the spread of AIDS, but they are also opposed to increased spending for weapons systems.

They approve of President Bush's veto of federal funding for abortions — even in the extreme cases of rape and incest — but they disagree with Mr. Bush on capital punishment.

If there is some inconsistency here, it is more an inconsistency of methods than outcomes.

The bishops — and the Vatican also — seem to be employing two different methods of theological argumentation when addressing questions of sexual morality, on the one hand, and questions of social morality, on the other.

They still derive their teachings on sexual morality from the neo-Scholastic seminary textbooks of the pre-Vatican II period.

That theological universe is one of un-

changing absolutes, of universally binding and easily recognizable principles, of clearly definable hierarchical structures in which God arranges everything from the top down.

When the bishops turn to matters of social morality, however, they enter a different world and follow a different method.

It is a method that acknowledges change and contingency, diversity and pluralism, and the necessity of prudential judgments.

Accordingly, in their teachings about matters of social morality (economic justice, human rights, and peace), the bishops respect the crucial distinction between principle and application.

"When making applications of these principles we realize — and we wish readers to recognize — that prudential judgments are involved based on specific circumstances which can change or which



can be interpreted differently by people of good will ..." (*The Challenge of Peace, Pastoral Letter on War and Peace, 1983*).

But on matters pertaining to sexual morality, that distinction between principle and application seems to collapse. There is no room for prudential judgment. Changing circumstances are not taken into account. And only one interpretation — the official one — is allowed.

Therefore, a Catholic politician may agree in principle with the bishops that all human life — including life in the womb — is sacred and worthy of protection.

But if that same politician should disagree with the bishops on the political and legislative choices to be made in defense of that principle, he incurs their moral wrath.

At the most recent meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore, it was even proposed that Catholic politicians be excommunicated if their political and legislative positions on abortion differ from those of the bishops.

The press, always ready for a juicy story, drew its own conclusions about intended targets: Gov. Mario Cuomo of New York, Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, Gov.-elect James Florio of New Jersey, and so forth.

But there has never been talk of excommunicating Congressman Henry Hyde of Illinois, a vigorous opponent of abortion, for disagreeing with the bishops on capital punishment, or nuclear deterrence, or United States policy in Central America.

It is assumed that there is always room for legitimate disagreement with the bishops concerning the application of the principles of social morality because the bishops aren't really competent in matters of economic or military policy. Former Treasury Secretary William Simon's put-down of the bishops' 1986 pastoral on the economy in *National Review* is a case in point.

On the other hand, it is also assumed that there is no room for disagreement with the bishops on matters of sexual morality because the bishops are competent in matters of medical science, marital intimacy, and reproductive technology.

Do we have a seamless garment here, or a patchwork quilt?

Joseph responds to God's call with faith and understanding

By Cindy Bassett
Counser Columnist

Sleep was impossible tonight. Joseph was a private man and he had held today's grief inside until he was alone in his room. Now the burden of what had happened lay like a heavy stone on his chest as he turned it over and over again in his mind ...

He was surprised to see Mary at his carpentry shop today. She hardly ever came to visit; that was not her way. Mary never wanted to disturb him while he was working.

Joseph was delighted when she did come. Mary was soon to be his wife. Nearly everyone in Nazareth knew their two families and would be coming to the wedding. Until now, Mary's words had broken Joseph's heart.

"Joseph, I am going to have a baby," Mary told him. Nothing could ever have prepared him for such betrayal. "It's not what you think," she added.

What had he thought? Joseph's mind had gone blank. He could hardly breathe. So he did something to Mary he had never done

before. Joseph shut her completely out. He was not thinking of Mary's pain, only of his own bitter anguish.

"I want you to leave Mary," Joseph said. Then he turned away until he heard Mary close the door lightly behind her.

"Lord, what does this mean?" Joseph cried out. "All of my life, I have tried to be a good man. Why has this happened now? I had my life all carefully planned out before this. I've been fair in my dealings with others. And I've been faithful to your laws."

Suddenly, in the midst of his own distress, a terrible thought occurred to Joseph. If Mary had sinned, then she was subject to the law. Adultery was punishable by stoning to death!

If there was one certainty still remaining in Joseph's life, it was that he loved Mary. That would never change — no matter how everything turned out.

"I'll break my engagement to Mary privately," Joseph decided. "There must be no shame on either family especially for Mary's sake. Perhaps I will move away. Carpenters are always needed. But I could



never bear to leave Mary. Help me God. Most of all, help Mary."

With this one hazy decision made, Joseph drifted off to sleep. A short time later, it was daylight. Surprisingly, Joseph awoke feeling refreshed. He almost expected to see the man who had spoken to him still standing there.

"Joseph, do not be troubled any longer," the man had told him. "Have no fear about taking Mary for your wife. For this baby was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. Name the boy 'Jesus' because he will save people from their sins."

Joseph got up and began to get dressed. His mind was spinning with so much to do. Soon there would be a marriage.

Together he and Mary would go to Bethlehem and register for the census. The Messiah was coming. Joseph was ready to begin the journey now.

Scripture reference: Matthew, 1:18-25.

Meditation: Jesus, help us to look to you with faith when our lives do not turn out the way we have planned.

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