

## Loyalty can function as a vice

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

A virtue is literally a power to accomplish some moral good, even in the face of obstacles and at the cost of personal sacrifice.

Unlike natural human qualities, like the power of speech, virtues are never morally neutral.

Thus, justice isn't something we practice one day but suspend on another. Justice is for all the time, in every relationship, and in every circumstance.

The same is true of charity, temperance, fortitude, prudence, mercy, forgiveness, fidelity and so on.

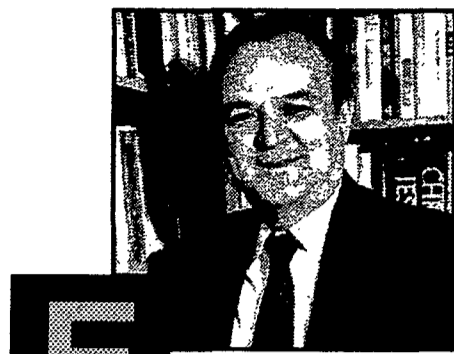
The last example — fidelity — can help us distinguish virtues from closely related natural qualities, which may sometimes inspire morally good behavior and at other times not.

Fidelity is a virtue that makes us steadfast in our commitment to the will of God, governing our relationships not only with God but also with others. Because it is a virtue, the practice of fidelity is always morally good.

Seemingly identical with the virtue of fidelity is the natural human quality known as loyalty.

I say "seemingly identical," because loyalty is not a virtue. Whether or not a given act of loyalty is morally good, bad, or indifferent depends on circumstances.

For the most part, loyalty is moral-



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ly neutral, but it can also function as a vice.

I refer to the following as examples:

- A legislative body organizes itself for a new term. The majority leader asks for a member's vote in support of her reelection to the post. The member pledges his vote as an act of loyalty.

That act is neither morally good nor morally bad, but morally neutral.

- A dominant ethnic group marshals its military and political might to suppress a hated minority. The dominant group issues a call-to-arms to all able-bodied men in the group. Out of loyalty many respond, joining in a campaign of destruction, rape, and

murder of innocent civilians.

Such loyalty is neither morally good nor morally neutral, but morally evil.

- Colonists in a new land grow restive under the tyrannous control of the homeland's government. A rebellion ensues. Most support the revolutionary cause; some remain loyal to the homeland. History will call them Loyalists.

If loyalty is a virtue, the Loyalists are in the right and the revolutionaries in the wrong. But we know that loyalty to an established government isn't always morally right. Indeed, those who were loyal to the Nazi regime shared in its terrible moral guilt.

Were those who remained loyal to England during the American Revolutionary War morally right or morally wrong? Or was it, in the end, a morally neutral posture, akin to the legislator's act of supporting one candidate over another for the post of majority leader?

- An academic unit at a Catholic university sponsors what it calls a crash course in the basics of Catholicism. Its brochure reassures potential subscribers that the lecturers will be Catholics "loyal to the pope and the magisterium."

A strongly conservative Catholic monthly magazine offers similar assurances in its published ads: "We stand with the papacy and the magisterium."

How is one to evaluate such appeals

to loyalty?

Undoubtedly, the producers of the brochure and the ad assume such loyalty to be morally good. The question is: do they also assume it to be a virtue, we never have to defend our practice of it, while those who don't practice it are to be condemned.

On the other hand, if loyalty isn't a virtue, we always have to make a case-by-case defense of it, even of our loyalty to "the papacy and the magisterium."

Only those totally unfamiliar with the history of the church and of the papacy will balk at that last observation.

Those who boast of their loyalty to "the papacy and the magisterium" are probably referring to their loyalty to the current pope, which is a far different matter from loyalty to the papacy as such.

The moral goodness of loyalty to a particular pope isn't self-evident. Unlike fidelity, loyalty isn't a virtue.

Therefore, such Catholics would have to give reasons why their self-professed loyalty to a particular pope is morally good, while loyalty to other popes in history would not have been so.

It would be illuminating if, at the same time, they could let the rest of us know whether or not they believe that there is such a thing as a "loyal opposition" in the church? Or is loyalty only theirs to glory in?

## Tiny seeds reap great harvests

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Mark 4:26-34; (R1) Ezekiel 17:22-24; (2) 2 Corinthians 5:6-10.

Our Lord was one of the greatest teachers who ever lived. One day He saw that the opposition of the religious leaders of His day was causing His disciples to become discouraged. So Our Lord told a series of parables, short stories from everyday life that had a lesson to teach. He told eight parables on the kingdom, the church, He was founding. The lesson of all eight was that no matter the opposition, in the end the kingdom would be victorious. Therefore be patient and hopeful.

Jesus said that God's kingdom is like seed scattered on the ground. Sure a lot of the seeds would be lost. So what? There would nevertheless be an enormous harvest.

One June morning 145 years ago, Jean Henri Dunant woke up and opened his window in his beloved Switzerland. He heard a great commotion in the streets and discovered that a war had started in Italy.

He went to Italy to see what was going on. There, he saw soldiers fighting



### A WORD FOR SUNDAY

on a hillside near the town of Castiglione. Everyone was shooting at everyone else. He watched as men were hit by bullets, gave horrible cries, and fell to the ground. He never saw anything like this before. When the fighting stopped at dusk, he felt he should do something to help the wounded men. So he went to town and asked people to go to the battlefield with him. And they did, farmers, bakers and tailors. They spent the

night giving as much assistance as they could to the wounded men.

Once back home, Henri could not forget what he had seen. So he wrote down his experiences, describing the horrible battle sight and men being shot. He suggested that every country should have a relief society to help wounded soldiers.

Five years later, the first rescue society was organized in Geneva, Switzerland in 1864. It was called the Red Cross. Soon other countries joined the society. Everyone forgot all about Henri until an article appeared in a newspaper in 1895. In 1901 he was given the very first Nobel Peace Prize.

Henri planted a seed that grew into an organization that has helped millions of people all over the world. That's the way God's kingdom works: great harvests from tiny seeds.

Our task is to plant seeds, but often the growth is not evident. That should not discourage us. As St. Paul said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6). It is God who makes things grow. We must be patient. We must never give up. We must wait. The seeds will grow. But God's ways are not our ways. We must trust Him and wait.

Often great things happen from small beginnings. The mustard seed's tininess is proverbial. Yet from this tiny seed comes a shrub so large that the birds can dwell in its branches.

Have you ever heard of the name, Rita Rizzo? She spent her youth in poverty. When she was a young woman, Rita decided to become a woman religious. She felt God was calling her into the television ministry. But she knew nothing of television; and even worse, she had no money.

But she prayed and went gaily in the dark. With only a few dollars and a handful of sisters, she started her own network — the Eternal Word Television Network in Birmingham, Ala. Sister Rita is Mother Angelica. Her accomplishments in the media are astounding. She reaches into more than 15 million homes daily with no-nonsense advice on morality and with compassion and encouragement for the thousands who call her on "Mother Angelica Live."

Are there some tiny seeds that you and I could be planting? Some word of love, some act of encouragement? Is there some ministry in which you and I could be involved — realizing that from the tiniest seed great growth can come.

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