

# Struggle shows reality, beauty of moral life

**Dr. Sister Patricia Schoelles, SSJ**  
Courier columnist

Earlier this week I served as part of a team giving a conference for women engaged in various forms of church ministry. My role was to make a presentation on Catholic moral teaching as a source of moral wisdom.

My goal for this presentation was to establish the church's moral teaching as a significant aid in helping Catholics understand the meaning of their decisions and actions, their quandaries and experiences. I have long been convinced that one of the primary roles of church moral teaching is to be a source of insight to us as we move through the incredible complexity of life in the United States of the 20th century.

My overall impression at the end of my short presentation was that I had been fairly successful — at least no one had fallen totally asleep — and that some people even seemed pleased by what had happened in the session. But afterward, one woman from the audience approached me about a concern she had about her own experience and struggle with one element of Catholic moral teaching.

What she shared with me included a tragic story involving the death of her sister, who had been a member of a religious community. About a year ago, a man broke into the convent and brutally killed her.

This was a terrible story. But what the woman wanted to talk about was her personal struggle with one aspect of our church's moral teaching: namely, the church's stance on the death penalty. The man who was charged with killing her sister had been apprehended by the state authorities,



**HE MORAL LIFE**

and now the prosecutors were asking for the death penalty.

The woman told me about her struggle to relate the church's opposition to the death penalty with her new and terrible experience of her sister's death.

She explained that she had always accepted this teaching and the truth supporting it. She understood that in God's eyes and with God's grace there is no one "beyond the possibility of conversion," so it is not up to human beings or their institutions to kill one another as punishment for wrongdoing. She referred to Scripture passages proclaiming that judgment is finally and properly God's, and not ours. She talked about her firm belief that "the state" ought not to kill in order to deter others from killing. She spoke about her profound belief in the church's attempt to be consistently in favor of life.

But she also spoke about her anger and pain in the face of her sister's murder. She spoke about the way this

death had affected her mother, brothers and sisters. She talked about her sister's congregation and how its members now confronted grief and fear and concerns about their safety and their commitments to ministry. She talked about the wonderful character and life of service that had been her sister's. She talked about her confusion and doubt and her new difficulties in trusting others.

In the face of all this, she is struggling to deal with her own situation and the church's teaching on the death penalty. She knows very clearly what that teaching is, so her problem is not one of knowing or understanding it. She is not denying that the church has a right and even a duty to teach on important matters affecting human life. She is not cavalierly, lightly or easily rejecting a teaching the church holds.

But she is acknowledging that for now, at least, she cannot simply accept this teaching the way she had before the murder of her sister.

This is a dramatic story, and it has many unique aspects. But it illustrates well something of the way in which we all relate to church moral teachings at one time or another. I think it demonstrates one of the best ways in which church members interact with church teachings, and one of the best ways in which church teachings are meant to affect our lives.

Church teaching is above all a service to church members. The moral teachings of our church are there to help us. The woman who spoke with me understood that. She knows that these teachings present a resource, a "source of moral wisdom" for those who are striving to live on a path of union with God. This is not the only

way the moral teachings of our church function, but it is certainly the most important way, in my opinion.

The woman who spoke with me also realizes that she cannot deny her own experience even in the face of this important church teaching. She understands, too, that she cannot simply dismiss the church's teaching because her experience at the present time seems to contradict it.

She has made the decision to continue struggling with this teaching and with her own experience. Her stance on this issue strikes me as right on target in showing how a mature, responsible, faithful Catholic deals with our church's teachings in the light of her or his own experience.

Generally, most of the individual teachings of the church are very easy for us to simply understand and accept. Occasionally we find a need to "struggle" with a particular teaching.

At times I hear very harsh rhetoric coming from some extremes within our church. Sometimes people actually seem to think that if a person cannot immediately and wholeheartedly accept a particular moral teaching of the church, that person ought to LEAVE the church or at least consider himself or herself a "bad" Catholic! Sometimes other people suggest that the church ought NOT to adopt particular moral positions on individual moral issues! Both of these extremes deny something of the beauty and a great deal of the reality of living as a Catholic Christian in 20th-century America.

In my opinion, the struggle of the woman whose sister was killed, and her respect for both her own experience and the church's teaching, is much more representative of this beauty and this reality.

## MISSION NEWS

**S**ister Benedict remembers the first child of her long "career": a newborn baby weighing only two pounds.

Since then, as she cares for abandoned children in her homeland, Bangladesh,



Sister Benedict has been able to watch so very many other children grow up to crawl, to walk. ♦ Living in Indonesia, not so far from Sister Benedict, is Adriano. As a young boy, he used to be a "helper" for his parish priest, carrying Father's bag as he traveled from village to village. Later, he heard Christ's call to follow Him, as a priest.

♦ Throughout the Missions, young men hear the Lord's call to serve as priest; young women, to enter Religious life. You can help them say "Yes!" with your own generous response through the Propagation of the Faith/St. Peter Apostle.

### THE PROPAGATION OF THE FAITH/St. Peter Apostle

Fr. Robert C. Bradler  
1150 Buffalo Rd.  
Rochester, NY 14624  
Attention: Dept. C

- \$700, seminarian/year
- \$300, Sister/Brother novice/year
- \$100
- \$50
- \$25
- \$10
- \$ \_\_\_\_\_ (other)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Please remember **The Society for the Propagation of the Faith** when writing or changing your Will. #344 (6/16/94)

## BARTOLOMEO FUNERAL HOME, INC.



Peter W. Giuliani, Jr. Philip P. Perotto Micheal P. Perotto

Personalized service in the community since 1922.

1425 Lexington Avenue, Rochester, NY 14606  
conveniently located near 390

**(716) 254-5400**

## NOTICE OF NONDISCRIMINATORY POLICY AS TO STUDENTS

The Aquinas Institute admits students of any sex, race, religion, color, national or ethnic origin to all rights, privileges, programs, and activities generally made available to students at the school. The Aquinas Institute does not discriminate on the basis of sex, race, religion, color, national or ethnic origin in the administration of educational programs, admissions policies, scholarship or loan programs, athletic or any other school administered programs.

## HOMOSEXUALITY IS IT A SIN?

Internationally Acclaimed Speaker and Theologian

**Fr. John Harvey**

is the director of "Courage", a spiritual support group for those with homosexual difficulties. In addition to discussing how the current homosexual movement impacts our families and our society he will address alternatives to an active homosexual life-style from a Catholic perspective.

Join us on Saturday, June 25, 1994 at

St. Thomas the Apostle Church, 4536 St. Paul Blvd., Rochester  
Holy Mass will begin at 9:00AM Conference to follow 10:00AM to 11:30AM  
Light refreshments available



Anyone interested in learning the official Catholic Church teachings on this subject should be sure to attend.

**Catholic United for the Faith** (Contact Catholics United for the Faith at 248-9094 for more information.)