

'Religious work' includes advocacy

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

A few years ago Peter Henriot and Joe Holland wrote a book on Catholic social teaching. They titled it "Our Best Kept Secret: The Rich Heritage of Catholic Social Teachings." The book is a handy reference work containing summaries of the papal encyclicals and other authoritative works dealing with social morality.

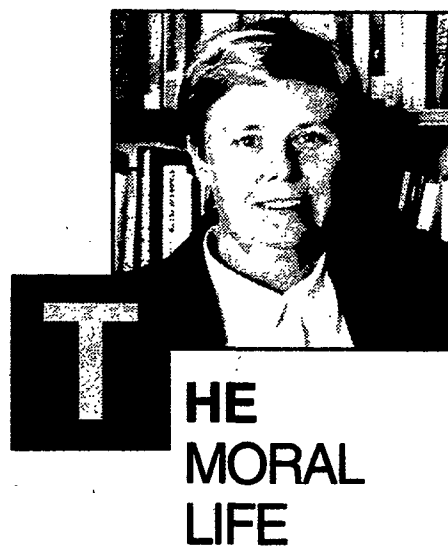
But its title is provocative; it alerts us to the fact that, in our catechesis and preaching, we have neglected the implications our Catholic faith holds for responsibility in the social, economic and political realms.

Like many other Catholics, I received a fine background in doctrinal issues and personal morality. My training and upbringing led me to understand complex doctrines like "transubstantiation" at the age of reason (seven years), and I could cite the teachings of one papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*.

But often we heard virtually nothing about the social teachings of our church. Sadly, our rich body of social teachings has been treated as a kind of "step child."

So it is not surprising that sometimes people ask why the church gets involved in political and economic matters. Recently I spoke with a man who disapproved of the U.S. bishops' economics pastoral, and thought issues of national defense ought not to be addressed by church leaders.

Actually, from its very outset, the



church has been concerned with political and economic matters. Works like Peter Phan's "Message of the Fathers of the Church: Social Thought" illustrate that even in the second and third centuries, the economic order and social relationships in society were subjects of the preaching and teaching of church leaders.

Bryan Hehir, SJ, adviser to the bishops and well-known speaker and writer, has often lamented the fact that this early heritage has been neglected for many Catholics growing up in the first half of our own century. Father Hehir thinks that we are doing better now, and predicts that when the religious history of the second half of the 20th century is written, it will be known as the period in which the social teachings were drawn

from the fringe of Catholic life to the center of our experience.

In looking for the roots of this movement to let the social teachings play a greater role in our faith and church life, we can point to the Gospels themselves, where we read that Jesus summarized "the whole of the law and the prophets" with the command to love God and our neighbor. But we know that to love and care for some of our neighbors, we have to advocate and work for a change in the way some of our public institutions and practices are structured.

More recently, a statement from the 1971 Synod of Bishops shows the church's belief that working for social change is a way of witnessing to the Gospel: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." This document, "Justice in the World," is said to be the most quoted of any Catholic document of all time. Sadly, many Catholics don't even know that it exists!

In view of these basic tenets of our faith, then, we should not be surprised that our bishops have issued important teachings on U.S. defense policy and economic practices. We should not be dismayed by their involvement in the debate about health-care reform, where they have advanced a strong position for restructuring our

health-care system to provide basic care to all Americans. In fact, we should try — in the name of our faith — to play an active role in social, economic and political issues ourselves!

I recently heard a parable that might help illustrate the connection between faith and political action:

Once there was a farming town that could be reached by a narrow road with a bad curve in it. There were frequent accidents on the road especially at the curve, and the preacher would preach to the people of the town to make sure they were Good Samaritans. And so they were, picking up accident victims along the road, for this was a religious work. One day someone suggested they buy an ambulance to get the accident victims to the town's hospital more quickly. The preacher preached and the people gave, for this was a religious work. Then one day a member of the town council suggested that the town authorize building a wider road and taking out the dangerous curve.

Now it happened that the mayor had a farm market right at the curve on the road and was against taking out the curve. Someone asked the preacher to say a word to the mayor and the congregation about it on the next Sunday. But the preacher and most of the people figured they had better stay out of politics. So when Sunday came, the preacher preached on the Good Samaritan Gospel and encouraged the people to continue their fine work of picking up the accident victims — which they did.

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