

COLUMNS  
**COMMENTARY**

# Differing moral stances test ties that bind

By Dr. Patricia A. Schoelles, SSJ,  
Courier columnist

A recent conversation with a group of parishioners led me to reflect on the fact that the church now recognizes two moral positions regarding warfare.

Catholics in conscience now may assume a pacifist position regarding the morality of war — believing that all warfare is immoral. But the church also recognizes the more traditionally Catholic stance of accepting a "just war" position. This position maintains that, given the tendency of nations to violate the territory of other nations, war at times may be a tragic and regrettable moral choice.

Obviously, I could devote many columns to discussing these two positions regarding this moral issue, which is probably the central moral issue of the 20th century. But for now, at least, I'd like to set that discussion aside and consider instead the question of the church recognizing two differing moral positions on a single issue.

This fact represents a clear change from what I had come to accept about church moral teaching. I had assumed that there could be only one morally valid position on moral questions. When I learned that the church had altered its centuries-old claim of a single official stance on warfare (we have been a "just war church" since the fourth century), I assumed at first that the change would be just an intellectual shift. I thought that our response



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would be simply to try to understand both of these positions of conscience.

But more recently, I have discovered that this change requires more than simply understanding two opposing moral positions. It demands that we learn how to be the church in a new way. In particular, it requires that we find ways to be a community bound together in faith while holding different positions on moral issues.

This discovery was intensified for me by a second conversation I had last week. That conversation involved a man who described himself as a convinced pacifist. Thus, he found himself in a quandary about his nephew's decision to become a fighter pilot.

The man spoke of his difficulty in relating to his nephew, whose position on war was in conflict with the

uncle's. The two opposing views had led to two very different ways of life. This difference in lifestyle had caused some difficulty in relating as a family.

Church communities can be somewhat akin to family communities. The difference among us regarding the morality of warfare — now officially recognized by the church — places new demands on us as a community. We will need to rely more significantly on the ties that bind us together in faith in order to be a single church that includes opposing stands on single moral issues.

There are two ways in which I think we can help ourselves to do this. One is to remind ourselves often that "the reason for our faith," as St. Paul says, is that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Our faith rests, ultimately, not on our agreement about moral issues. It rests on the Risen Christ.

We need, as a church, to reassert constantly the primacy of those claims of our faith that actually form the foundation for our belief. These also provide the basis for our belonging to one another in the community of faith. If we are clear about the ultimate source of our unity, resting as it does on God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ, we will give ourselves new freedom to recognize the relative importance of other elements in our tradition.

A second way to help us remain a community of faith while differing on particular moral issues is to come to understand ourselves as a "community of moral discourse" rather than

as a "community of moral certainty." By this I mean that we need to recognize the unfinished character of our personal and communal approach to our Catholic and moral tradition.

The Second Vatican Council called the church a "pilgrim people." By this phrase, the Council urged us to understand ourselves as a people still on the way — still in the process of being formed in understanding and holiness. We all need a chance to grapple with the teachings of our church and with the moral issues that confront us. Through our diocesan synod process, we claimed morality as an area in which we want more understanding — for adults as well as for our children.

If we enter into the implementation of this synod goal with the attitude that all we need are "answers" without allowing ourselves and one another the opportunity for genuine, honest questioning and investigation about our moral teachings, we surely will have failed to be the "moral community" we are called to be.

Today we differ on the question of warfare, and on many other moral issues as well. We need to learn how to be a community able to sustain this kind of difference if we are to answer our call to be the church. Being clear about what truly unites us can help us to accept differences among us. So can the acknowledgment that we all need a chance to ask our questions and express our thoughts about our attempts to deal with the church's moral teaching.

# It is in giving that we receive

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

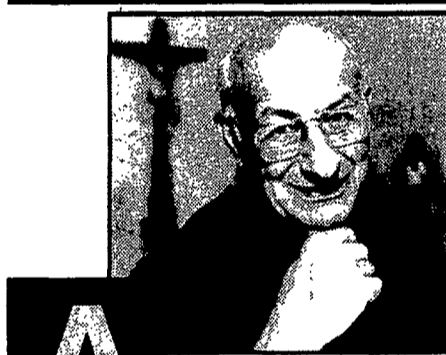
**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Mark 12:38-44; (R1) 1 Kings 17:10-16; (R2) Hebrews 9:24-28.

We meet two widows in Sunday's readings. One lives in the time of Elijah the prophet about 850 B.C. in the town of Zarephath, 12 miles north of Tyre on the Mediterranean Sea. The other lived in the time of the Lord in the city of Jerusalem.

These widows had two things in common: both were women of great faith and generosity.

Both of them were givers. What they gave was objectively very little: one gave a cup of water and a bit of bread; the other, two copper coins. Subjectively, however, in terms of what these gifts meant to each of them, they gave everything — "all they had to live on."

And why did they give? The widow of Zarephath gave because she saw Elijah was a prophet, a man of God. The widow in the Gospel gave because she saw that the Temple was the house of God. Both gave from religious mo-



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tives.

And what was the result of their giving? The widow of Zarephath's jar of flour did not go empty and the oil jug did not go dry. As for the widow in the Gospel, her gift outweighed the gifts of the rich, according to He who is the judge of the living and the dead.

One lesson these widows can teach us is that it is not what we give that

counts with God, but why. Our motives determine the worth of our gift.

There was a certain Scottish lord in Fife. He was rich but miserly. Every Sunday he would put one pence in the collection. No matter how much his wealth increased, it was always one pence. One Sunday, he dropped a five-shilling piece into the basket by mistake. When he discovered his error, he hurried to the back of the church to the usher to retrieve his five-shilling piece and replace it with his pence. The usher refused to let him do this saying, "Ye may put in what ye like, but ye maun tak' naething out."

The Laird, finding he could not prevail, finally said, "Ah weel, I suppose I'll get credit for it in heaven."


"Na, na," said the usher, "ye'll get credit only for the pence. It's not the amount that counts, but the intent of the giver."

Another lesson these widows can teach us is that of faith. The widow of Zarephath knew Elijah was a man of God; therefore she was willing to give him a drink. Remember for two years no rain had fallen and water was precious. Once Elijah saw that she was

willing to give a little, he asked her for more: a bit of bread. A bit, not much. But in times of famine, a bit was a lot. Reluctantly, she protested, "I have enough only for my son and me." Elijah insisted and then demanded further that she serve him before herself and her child. What faith she had! How gloriously God rewarded her!

In the Gospel the widow had even greater faith. She gave unasked. She gave with no promise that her funds would not run out. The two copper coins she gave were hardly worth a cent, but to her they were worth her life, all she had to live on. How great was her generous heart! For she gave two coins — she could have kept one, couldn't she? How easily she could have rationalized doing just that. But she did not.

In our commitment to Christ and His Church, we cannot set limits. St. Ignatius prayed: "Jesus teach me to be generous: to give and not count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; for it is in giving we receive; it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."



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