

Theologians need to address disagreements

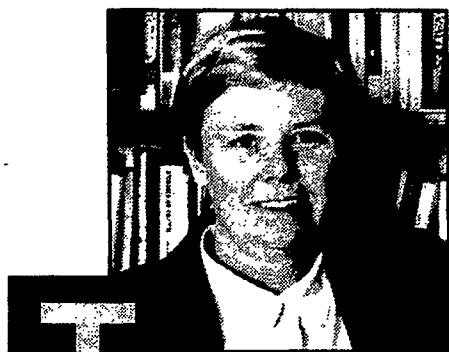
By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

Last week, a disagreement about what constitutes good teaching of moral theology set me to reflecting about my responsibility as a moral theologian and teacher. The disagreement concerned whether it is appropriate for teachers of moral theology to present the theologians' opinions about current issues along with exposition of the official church teaching on these questions.

It is my conviction that it is entirely appropriate, and even necessary, for teachers of moral theology to help their students understand both the church's official teaching on moral issues, and the discussions that surround these issues.

For example, church teaching on euthanasia is a topic widely discussed by theologians today, because advances in technology can force us to make new kinds of decisions about medical treatment. Informed Catholics need to understand the background underlying the church's teaching against euthanasia. But we also have to know what questions are being raised about that teaching in light of developments in medicine.

If we do not allow our fellow Catholics to hear moral theologians



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describe and explain the range of questions and opinions on particular issues, we are left with secular media coverage as our only source for interpreting the debates surrounding moral issues.

Today, many Catholics wonder whether all decisions to refuse treatment constitute euthanasia. The fact that disagreement exists about some applications of the church's teaching on this matter does not mean that we can ignore the matter and simply repeat to one another the church's teaching without any mention of the

debates at hand. To do so is to tempt Catholics to think that the only alternatives open to us are Dr. Kevoorkian or prolonged and excruciating death.

Today Catholics know that there are questions and disagreements about the church's teaching on some moral issues. Moral theologians can help us to understand these questions and disagreements by describing clearly the origin of the questions and their meaning in relation to official teaching. If we do not allow people's questions to be discussed, we risk giving the impression either that everything is up for grabs in moral issues or that our church's official teaching is so rigid that it cannot allow pastoral exceptions in justified cases.

As Catholics, we have reason to be proud of the moral teaching of our church. We also can be proud of the ways in which this teaching is able to adapt and to allow for pastoral applications in a variety of settings and circumstances.

We have reason to be confident enough in our faith and in one another to listen and understand the discussions that currently surround moral issues. How else will we face our obligations as adult and informed Catholic clergy and laity?

The disagreement I had last week involved a discussion on the topic of

homosexuality. This is a sensitive issue for all of us, and we all have questions about it. Participants in a class I led had asked for a discussion of the issue. My approach to answering questions on this topic has been to explain as clearly as I can five fundamental aspects of the issue: the church's basic approach to sex and sexuality; the official teaching on the morality of homosexual acts; church teaching on the homosexual orientation; and the teaching about our obligations toward gay and lesbian people.

I think these are five areas about which all adult Catholics should be reasonably informed in relation to the question of homosexuality. Preventing conversation about this issue will not make it go away. Moral theologians who are willing to speak clearly on the church's teaching, as well as on the questions that emerge today, can be enormously helpful to all of us. Their willingness to address even sensitive and greatly perplexing issues can help us all to move beyond infantile and ridiculously uninformed stances about very real questions that face Catholic families and Catholic parishes in every part of the United States today.

Dr. Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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