

## Principles must be applied to situations

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ  
Courier columnist

The new catechism's section on conscience outlines three aspects of the exercise of conscience. The document's statement reads: "Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality; their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed" (p. 439).

From this statement, which is consistent with what we know from our experience, it is obvious that it isn't enough to know what the principles or rules, say. The moral life requires also that we develop skill in applying these principles to the real situations we face in our everyday lives. This, I think, is what the catechism means by "application in the given circumstances by practical discernment."

St. Thomas Aquinas made statements similar to this in his own treatment of the moral life. At one point, Thomas said that it isn't particularly noteworthy just to know the principles — what really counts, he said, is "know-how in the particular." People who are expert in the moral life are those who have a practical sense of how to bring about goodness in the concrete circumstances of their actual lives.

That this sort of ability is valued by



### THE MORAL LIFE

the catechism, that it is verified in our own experience, and that it is upheld by a great genius of moral theology indicate to us that often there's more to it than a direct move from abstract principle to concrete circumstance. We've got to become skilled at knowing HOW the principles apply in real life.

I often use a simple example in my classes, but I know we all could come up with countless examples from our own lives. The example I use is this:

I value the principles of truth telling and promise keeping. I want to be a person who tells the truth and who keeps her promises, and I want to be a person others can depend on. Suppose that I agree to teach a certain class on a Tuesday evening at 7:30

p.m. Obviously I have to arrange my day and my other appointments to allow me to be present at the 7:30 class.

But suppose that, while traveling to the class, I come upon a very dramatic traffic accident along the way. It appears that I might be of assistance to the victims of the accident, and that my help is genuinely needed there.

Looking back at the words of the catechism, we are reminded that we need to conduct a "practical discernment of reasons and goods" in given circumstances. Clearly, I will have to responsibly weigh the principles of truth telling and promise keeping along with the other goods that will follow for those in the class if I proceed there. But now I will also need to consider another set of goods — those that may follow from my helping the accident victims.

Finally, I'll have to move to the judgment about my immediate concrete act right here and now — to stop and help, or to proceed to the class. Here I'll have to weigh still other factors that determine this particular situation. Am I on a relatively busy thoroughfare where others might be expected to come along? If so, perhaps they might be able to take my place. Or am I on a deserted rural road, where the responsibility for helping these people could be expected to be my responsibility alone?

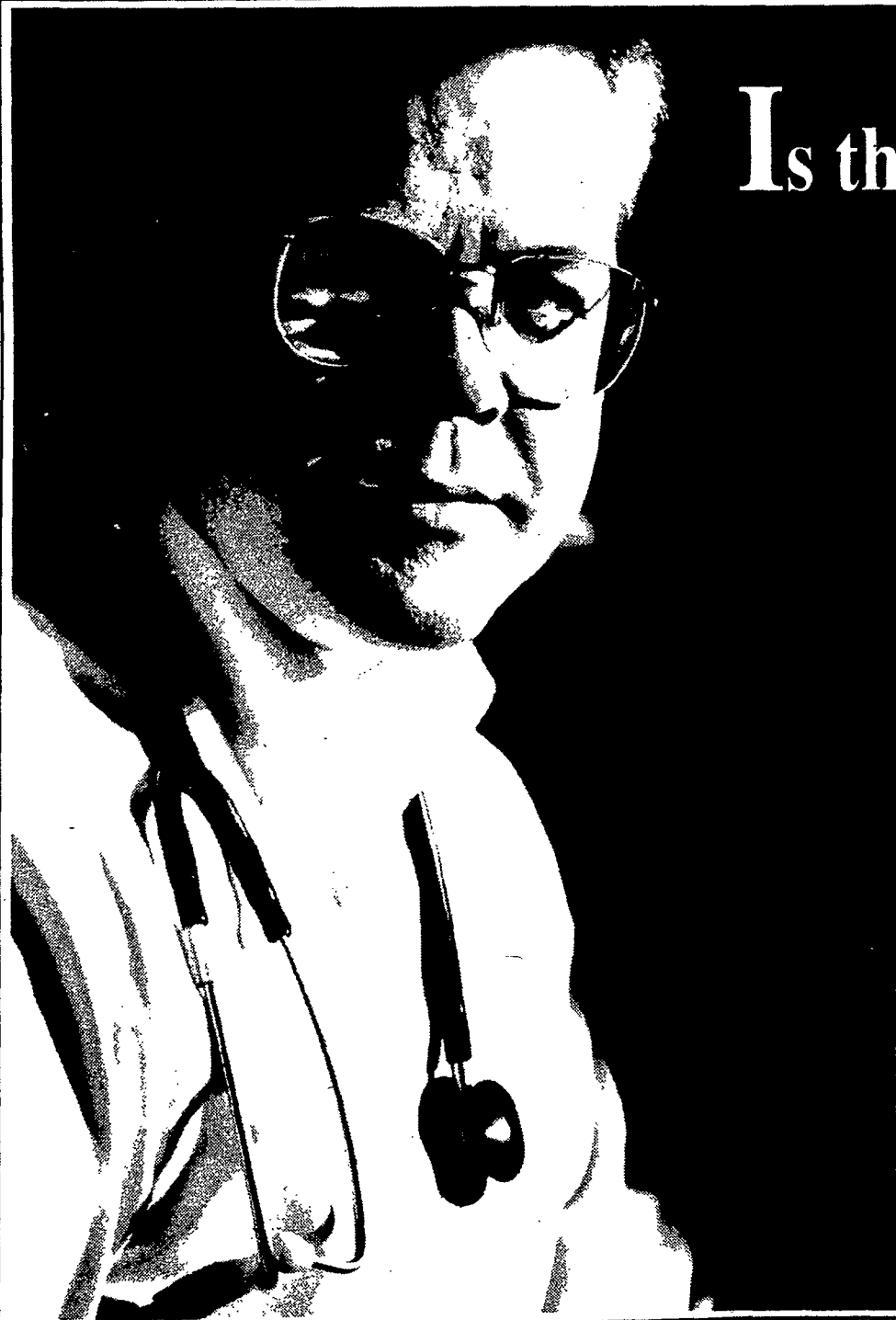
These are the kinds of circumstances that make "practical discern-

ment" about "concrete acts" necessary. It is not enough, as St. Thomas said, just to know the principles. We need to be good at discerning the "reasons and goods" that will help us to do the most good in the particular, unique, *concrete* events that make up our daily lives.

In this connection, it is most often the case that our decisions are not decisions made between "good or evil," as we might be led to expect. More often, we must decide between two or more "goods." Keeping my promise to teach the class is a good. Helping injured accident victims is also a good. My "moral choice" in this case — as in most cases — involves choosing between what moralists call "relative goods."

In thinking about the moral education that will be taking place in response to our diocesan synod priorities, we will need to provide people with the opportunity to explore the moral life on all three of these levels. We will need to include education about the principles of morality — including the teachings of our church. We also will need to provide educational opportunities that will allow us to discover more about the application of these principles, and to become more skilled in our judgments about the concrete acts we perform.

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



## Is there a doctor in your house?

St. Mary's Hospital can help you find a doctor best suited for you and your family -- right in your own neighborhood.

Our health care network comprises our main hospital campus and 30 locations throughout the community, including Brighton, Chili, East Rochester, Gates, Henrietta, Irondequoit, North Chili, North Greece, Penfield, Rochester and Spencerport.

St. Mary's affiliated physicians can serve your medical needs in a timely and convenient manner. Call 464-3519 to find a physician in your neighborhood who participates in your health insurance plan.



**St. Mary's Hospital**

You can expect more from us.