

Teaching combines insights of groups

By Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

During a conversation I had a few weeks ago, a question arose about the church's role as moral teacher. The question centered on whether each of us has the same role and function in advancing the church's moral teaching. In thinking about this question, I considered three distinct roles that need to be fulfilled with respect to church moral teaching.

The first role is that of church hierarchy — the pope and the bishops — who are responsible for articulating the official teaching of the church. Through their use of Scripture, their experience of tradition and their understanding of the "faith of the faithful," the pope and bishops (including individual bishops in their own dioceses, national conferences of bishops and bishops acting in union with the pope, the bishop of Rome) are responsible for formulating the church's "official" moral teachings at any given time.

These teachings, since they are directed at the whole church, remain at a general and abstract level. Addressed to children and adults, to Catholics in Africa and Asia, as well as in Northern Europe and the U.S., to the highly educated and to those with little formal schooling, these teachings must remain in a very general formulation and exist at the level of abstract principle.

A second role in the teaching func-



THE MORAL LIFE

tion of our church is that of theologians and preachers. The general and abstract teachings of the church must be analyzed, applied and understood in Catholics' lives, which have their own unique sets of circumstances and conditions. The moral teachings of the church must be understood in light of these unique circumstances.

Sometimes theologians and those engaged in pastoral work question or even criticize certain aspects of the official teaching. This is quite natural and has always been the case — even in the earliest years of the church's existence. Sometimes the real lives of faithful Catholics cause very reasonable questions to be raised about our official church teaching. This is how church teaching is advanced and how it comes more realistically to address

the actual needs and circumstances of the living church.

An example of how this takes place might be the pope's condemnation of capital punishment in his newest encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"). Rome has not always condemned the death penalty. But in recent years pastors, theologians and individual bishops' conferences have condemned capital punishment in particular countries, where violence and a general disrespect for life have become increasingly evident.

These theologians and bishops' conferences have been calling for a change in the "official" teaching for some time. As is usually the case, the "official" teaching follows the reflection and questioning of those who are trying to understand the implications of official teaching in the actual circumstances in which real people really live. We should not be alarmed or shocked that our moral teachings change, nor that the change does not come smoothly, to be accepted by all Catholics at exactly the same moment!

A third role in the teaching mission of the church is the one each Catholic must play. Each of us is called to hear and understand the church's teaching on moral matters. For this to take place, we must adopt a "teachable" stance whereby we are open to the teaching and ready to hear it. As members of the community of the church, we hear the church's teaching with a presumption that it is correct and that it comes to us as a help in our strug-

gle to live morally upright lives in response to God, who has first loved us.

For most of us most of the time, accepting the church's teaching is not a difficult matter. The teachings of our church are based on Scripture and tradition, on a knowledge of what the actual faith of the people earnestly believes, and is pronounced with care for our faithfulness to God.

Occasionally, and particularly in times of change, however, even faithful Catholics find it difficult to accept a given teaching of our church. Right now, many Catholics are honestly struggling with the issue of capital punishment. These times call us to learn more about the teaching with which we struggle. Part of the role individual Catholics play in the church's teaching mission is to consult such resources as pastors and teachers; the writings of theologians, bishops and others; and the opinions of other Catholics we have come to trust.

At times we will find that some teachings of our church are disputed — they are surrounded by disagreement among even faithful Catholics, theologians and others. This disagreement most often results from those in these three teaching roles trying to do their "jobs" in response to changing circumstances.

Questioning and disagreement, while sometimes uncomfortable and difficult, actually can be signs of life in a thriving faith community whose members are carrying out different but necessary roles in their mission to be a teaching church.

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