

COLUMNISTS

Being a U.S. Catholic has 'uniqueness'

In an apostolic letter from 1971, Pope Paul VI laid some important groundwork for the church of today. He wrote in *Octogesima Adveniens*: "In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution that has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the church.

"It is up to these Christian communities," Pope Paul VI continued, "with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christians and all people of good will, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed."

This passage points out from the perspective of the papal office what so many of us have discovered in our own experience: living as Catholics requires that we live a Catholicism suitable to the



the
moral
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

concrete circumstances in which we live. Being Catholic in the United States brings with it difficulties and opportunities quite different from the "problems and graces" that would be faced, for example, by Ugandan Catholics, or Argentinian Catholics, or even German Catholics.

Part of the reason for the strengthening of national conferences of bishops that occurred in the years following the Council is this recognition that each national church faces problems and situations that are unique to each nation. It is not adequate to simply "export" from Rome a single solution to moral and social problems, as if one church policy on any issue would suit the vari-

ety of cultures in which Catholicism is alive today.

Thus the problem of being Catholic in the U.S. brings with it a certain uniqueness. In many ways we are always "pioneers," faced with the task of figuring out how to embody our belief system in this society, with its particularities.

One of the difficulties we face is in opposing some practices while still participating in a political system that is built on compromise. We live in a society that cannot survive without tolerance. Thus, we are often unsure about how to oppose abortion, for example, when many of the people who comprise society with us disagree with our position. And those who disagree on this question have the right to disagree. We could use any number of other issues to illustrate this point. In New York State the use of the death penalty has become similarly problematic for Catholics.

One strategy in the face of this dilemma assumes that the only response to issues like these is to be absolute and to speak with uncompromising moral certainty about these issues.

This strategy is appealing in many ways. It is clear, unambiguous, and seems to exemplify a kind of moral courage that heroically resists error.

Historically, it has been an admirable strategy in formulating authentic responses to moral issues. But the background of U.S. culture might invite us to consider an additional moral imperative as well.

The fact is that we live in a nation with a strong commitment to moral pluralism, compassion, and majority rule. The reality of our situation includes a kind of "moral ambiguity" that is characteristic of any pluralistic society. Living in this country means that we will come in contact with conflicting ideas of right and wrong that come from many voices. These voices, even though they speak in error, have rights in the political process, and the people who hold them live with us in society.

As Catholicism searches for ways to assume its rightful place among the many voices of our culture, we need to accept the fact that moral pluralism is part of the democratic way of life. In this setting it is not enough to proclaim absolute positions on moral issues. We need also to search for ways to be tolerant and compassionate in the face of differing positions, and to engage in a complex political process that requires compromise and a recognition of moral ambiguity.

Reaping what we do not sow

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 18:1-8. (R1) Exodus 17:8-13. (R2) 2 Timothy 3:14-2.

All of Sunday's readings point to one theme: the need for perseverance and persistence in praying. The persistent prayer of Moses secured Israel's victory over the Amalekites. The persistent pleading of the widow won for her a favorable judgment. Paul tells Timothy to persist in preaching - "never losing patience."

However, the Gospel has another message: "Will not God do justice to his chosen who call out to him day and night?"

Don't we often think life is unfair? A man named John Micofsky was confident his life would be greatly improved once he rid himself of his wife. His dream came true on January 20, 1993, when his divorce from his wife, Maryann, was finalized. On January 21, she won the \$10.2 million jackpot in the New Jersey Pick-6 Lottery. The press asked how Micofsky took it. His attorney said, "Very upset, I think that's the word I would use."

That's putting it mildly.

Life seems unfair. Some get the gold mine, and others get the shaft. C. S. Lewis said that when we see an incident of unfairness occur, it is a signpost pointing to God.

The widow in the Gospel was being treated unfairly. Her judge feared nei-



a word
for
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

ther man nor God. He ignored her plea. Some people would have given up at that. But not her. She hounded him every chance she got. Finally, the judge gave in and justice prevailed.

We live in a world that seems sometimes unfair. We reap what we sow, the Bible says, but sometimes we reap what we do not sow.

U.S. tennis champion Arthur Ashe underwent heart-bypass surgery in 1983. At that time, hospitals were not checking blood samples for HIV - the virus that causes AIDS. Through a blood transfusion, Ashe contracted that dreaded disease. He did not suspect that he was infected until 1988, when he had to have brain surgery after his right arm became paralyzed. Then he knew.

In 1992, Ashe held a press conference and announced that he had the disease. He could have raged against God. But he didn't. Instead he made this beautiful profession of faith in God:

"I've had religious faith, growing up in the South and black and having the church as a focal point of my life," Ashe said. "I was reminded of something Jesus said on the cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Remember, Jesus was poor, humble, and of a despised minority. I wasn't poor in that my father was a policeman, but we certainly weren't rich. And Jesus asked the question, in effect, of why must the innocent suffer. And I'm not so innocent - I mean, I'm hardly a perfect human being - but you ask about yourself, 'Why me?'"

"And I think," he continued, "'Why NOT me? Why should I be spared what some have been inflicted with.' And I have to think of all the good of my life, of having a great wife and daughter and family and friends, and winning Wimbledon and the U.S. Open and playing for and coaching the Davis Cup team, and getting a free scholarship to UCLA - all kinds of good things. You could also ask about (these good things), 'Why me?' Sometimes there are no explanations for things, especially for the bad."

Isn't that a great testimony? Sometimes we don't understand with our limited brains why the innocent suffer, why life is unfair.

But we must remember: no pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown. How many

have climbed to God by the path of pain. Through tears we can see the rainbow.

Also, we must not forget that in the end justice will be done, as for the widow in the Gospel. In November of 1989, students started a revolution against the Communist Party in the former country of Czechoslovakia. They began chanting to the Communist leaders, "You have lost already! You have lost already!" Though the ultimate victory was still in the future, it happened.

In the end, God's justice will always prevail. Hold on to that truth like a piece of driftwood when you are about to sink from the raging flood of life's heartaches.

Daily Readings

Monday, Oct. 23

Rom 4:20-25; Lk 12:13-21

Tuesday, Oct. 24

Rom 5:12, 15, 17-19, 20-21;
Lk 12:35-38

Wednesday, Oct. 25

2 Rom 6:12-18; Lk 12:39-48

Thursday, Oct. 26

Rom 6:19-23; Lk 12:49-53

Friday, Oct. 27

Rom 7:18-25; Lk 12:54-59

Saturday, Oct. 28

Eph 2:19-22; Lk 6:12-19

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