

# COLUMNISTS

## Church offers much beyond 'bottom line'

Several days ago I received a call from a young man who wanted to know "just the bottom line" on what the church says about homosexuality.

This was an interesting proposal, I thought, because "the church" seems to say *quite a few* things about homosexuality. Thus, I was not entirely satisfied with relaying to this man a three-second response to his query over the phone. I explained that the church had offered official pronouncements on this question in three fairly recent documents released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1975, 1984 and 1986.

Just that fact alone — three pronouncements on a single topic over the course of 11 years, with the latter two of significant length — should have alerted my caller that "the bottom line" is a bit more complicated than we would perhaps like to think. So I assured my caller that I thought he would benefit from reading the actual text of the 1986 piece, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons."

What reading that text does, I think, is assure people that the official teaching of our church is not easily reduced to a single "bottom line." In truth, and as I have indicated in this column on many occasions, the beauty of our moral tradition is that it is carefully nuanced and, when interpreted rightly, can be truly responsive to the real



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

dilemmas faced by real people — even those of us living in this very complex 20th century. (This is not to say, either, that like every other aspect of church life and teaching, we cannot improve both the interpreters *and* the way we do our teaching!)

So as most people would expect, the 1986 document reinforces the conviction of our church, represented in its official teaching on sex and sexuality, that the norm of all human sexual expression is the heterosexual union of married couples, with every act of sexual intercourse promoting the love and commitment of the couple and remaining open to procreation. Obviously, sexual activity between same-sex couples falls short of this norm in a number of ways, and the document predictably states that this kind of activity is "deprived of its essential and indispensable finality, as being 'intrinsically disordered,' and able in no case to be approved of."

For many people, I suppose, that phrase IS "the bottom line" requested by my caller. For many people, that phrase represents the beginning and the end of anything else that needs to be said about this issue. Many of us would be more comfortable, I suppose, if repeating this phrase would simply end any further discussion of the topic.

But reading the actual text of the CDF document shows us that "the church" — even if by that phrase we mean JUST the official teaching pronouncements of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — actually says much more than that. And what the church actually says gives us the foundation for responding in a pastoral and Christian way to the "real life dilemmas" of "real life Catholics."

For example, another phrase in the same document says this: "(C)ircumstances may exist ... which would reduce or remove the culpability of the individual (engaged in homosexual activity) in a given circumstance."

Another passage says: "What is essential is that the fundamental liberty which characterizes the human person and gives him his dignity be recognized as belonging to the homosexual person as well. ..." Another reads: "The characteristic concern and good will exhibited by many clergy and religious in their pastoral care for homosexual persons is admirable and, we hope, will not diminish. ..." There are

other phrases like this as well.

Even this short review of a single issue in a single official document should alert us to the fact that the church does not try to dodge the complexity of "the human situation" when it constructs its moral teaching. Instead, its effort is to offer moral teaching that will be a help to people who are responding to concrete and complex circumstances. While the church offers clear moral norms on given issues, it has a developed theology of conscience and pastoral practice as well. To entertain any one of these strands of our tradition as the only "bottom line" is to distort the whole.

We would all, I think, like life to be a lot simpler. We would all be relieved to know that single-line answers to questions we have about life are all we need. Perhaps, at times, we would even like our church to be a less complete a teacher than it actually is! My own job would be much more beneficial, I suppose, if callers could ask for, and receive, quick three-minute responses to situations they encounter that perplex them.

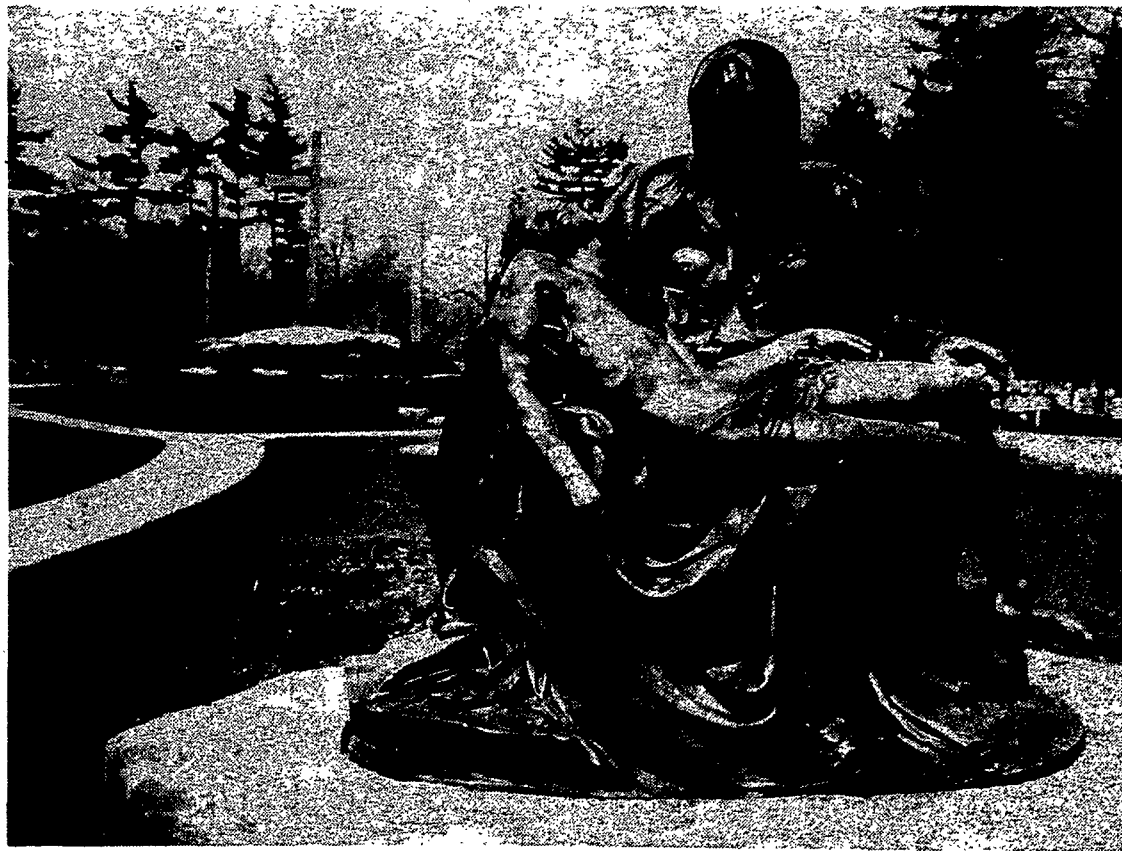
But if we listen to our church as it *actually* speaks, we will be led, I think, to find a much more realistic — and demanding — teaching than we might have expected! Sometimes learning more about our church can be more rewarding than we might have imagined.

*Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute, Rochester.*

To help celebrate its 125 years of service to the community, Holy Sepulchre Cemetery's staff and friends would like to invite the public to the following events:

- April 7 7 a.m. ecumenical sunrise service sponsored by the Greece Ministerial Association and hosted by Holy Sepulchre Cemetery Easter Sunday morning at the main gate on Lake Avenue.
- April 26 11 a.m. tree planting sponsored by the City of Rochester and the Monroe County Arbor Day Committee on Trinity Lake (back of East Section).
- June 23 Annual Field Mass co-sponsored by Holy Sepulchre Cemetery and the Knights of St. John at 10 a.m. inside All Saints Mausoleum, St. Bernard's Chapel.
- Sept. TBD Open house and anniversary Mass celebrated by Bishop Matthew H. Clark, bishop of the Rochester Catholic diocese. Includes open house, tour and refreshments.
- October 13 1 p.m. annual tree tour sponsored by Holy Sepulchre Cemetery at All Souls Chapel.

For more information on any of these events, please call (716) 458-4110.



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