

COLUMNISTS

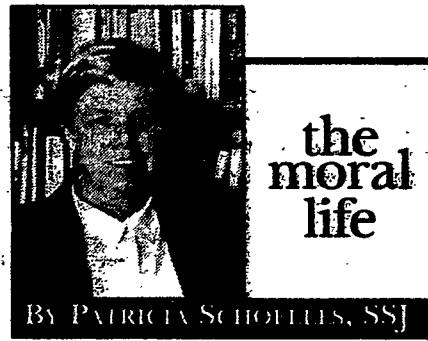
Auction would be field day for moral ancestors

A few weeks ago the news was filled with details about the auction of Mrs. Onassis' possessions. Of particular interest, of course, was the price paid for the various items. Comparing the actual price paid for individual pieces against the estimated worth of the objects under consideration seemed to provide great fun for both broadcasters and their audiences over those days.

A number of commentaries on this activity followed. One of these extolled the virtues of our economic system, filled as it is with so much freedom. Even if other people can't comprehend the value of what we may buy in our lifetimes, we should rejoice because we are free to purchase whatever we can afford and want. Another commentary compared people's desire to possess a piece of "Camelot" with the religious impulse to revere relics — objects that were at some point in contact with the saints of our various traditions.

I had no such exalted interpretations of the events surrounding this auction. My own reaction centered rather more simply on the amount of money that must be available for purchasing objects that appear to be superficial, or at least of secondary usefulness in maintaining the essentials of "a life well lived."

I couldn't help thinking about some of the things the news media tells me we



cannot afford these days: Medicaid, Medicare, health care in general, Social Security, education as we've known it, services for illegal immigrants, immigrants in general, welfare, support for those born of unwed mothers who can't afford the children they conceive, counseling for troubled children ... The list is long and I can't remember it all.

But I tempered my impulse to conclude that the same people who spent all that money at the auction should underwrite the costs of the systems that would support some of these other socially useful goods. I helped to balance my thinking by reminding myself that I, too, surround myself with a great many objects I don't really need.

Also, I thought, the people who are rich enough to pay those huge sums probably donate to charities of all sorts,

so benefit humanity in any number of ways. And Rush Limbaugh reminds me all the time about how over-taxed we all are, and that expecting the government to mediate some of this can only result in a no-growth economy that rewards the do-nothings!

Still, there must be some insight in all of this about some age-old moral notions we hold. For example, we might gain some perspective on our economic lives by thinking momentarily with some of the ancients who conceived of the idea of greed — in our tradition, this was even called a "capital sin."

Apparently there has been concern throughout history about what happens to human beings who indulge our insatiable longing for wealth and possessions.

An observation about "greed in our time," though, might lead some to conclude that greed can hardly be a sin. It must be a virtue! I was assured recently by a young friend from my neighborhood that to possess lots and lots, to have access to great luxury, to spend one's wealth on the pursuit of individual pleasure is "what it's all about."

But, again, there seems to be this opposing wisdom from our moral ancestors that would have us question the effect on our souls that untrammelled greed can have. Pope Leo XIII, for ex-

ample, warned in the last century that some economic systems can have the effect of promoting attitudes that invite people to "sacrifice the reasons for living."

Moral theologians from the outset of the Industrial Revolution have complained that prevailing thought patterns prevent us from putting our tremendous technical abilities at the service of all people and the wholeness of each person.

Popes and bishops have, over centuries, developed criteria for helping us to examine our economic lives on all levels, from theory to structure to behavior. These criteria ask us to consider how our economic decisions affect: the dignity, well-being and development of all people; the solidarity of humankind; and the active and creative participation of all who are part of any society.

Sometimes I like to pretend that I don't need much assistance from the wisdom of the ancients in interpreting the meaning of modern events and situations. But some ancient reflections on dangers to our souls might, after all, help us to think about activities at Sotheby's and elsewhere that show us to be living in an economy that is very rich, but very, very poor.

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

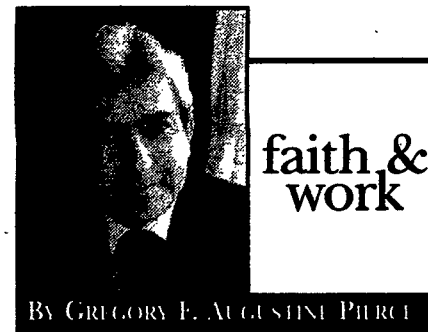
Commitment to community is timeless call

Who is Amitai Etzioni and why is he urging Christians (and others) to do what we should have been doing all along?

Etzioni is a professor of sociology at George Washington University in D.C. and the founder and chairman of the Communitarian Network. This is a "nonsectarian, nonpartisan, nationwide association" of "individuals and organizations who have come together to shore up the moral, social, and political environment."

"We believe," says the organization's vision statement, "that individual liberties depend upon the bolstering of the foundations of civil society: our families, schools, and neighborhoods. It is through these institutions that we acquire a sense of our personal and civic responsibilities, an appreciation of our rights and the rights of others, and a commitment to the welfare of the community and its members."

The communitarian hope for the fu-



ture is that "families, schools, and neighborhoods will serve as institutions that foster communities whose members care about one another and encourage each other to be ... ethical and socially responsible."

Isn't this exactly what Christians are supposed to be doing every day? As the Second Vatican Council said in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, "It is clear that

people are not deterred by the Christian message from building up the world, or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows. They are, rather, more stringently bound to do those very things."

Theologian John Coleman once observed: "The proper arena for forging the concrete historical ideal is not within the church but in the world."

If we Christians — especially the laity — had really gotten this idea in our guts, maybe there would not be the need for a secular movement to remind us all of our social responsibilities to each other and to society in general.

Last summer, Etzioni was the keynote speaker at the 5th Annual Hillenbrand Symposium in Chicago, named after Monsignor Reynold Hillenbrand, the pioneering social activist priest whose legacy includes a strong emphasis on the common good over against a corrosive individualism. Etzioni confessed to little knowledge of

Catholic social teaching, perhaps the best indication how little this tradition is operative in today's church and society.

Nineteen years ago, the Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern, a call-to-arms by a group of Catholic activists, reminded us that "the church is present to the world in the striving of the laity to transform the world of political, economic and social institutions. The clergy minister (should help) the laity exercise their family, neighborly, and occupational roles mindful of their Christian responsibility."

In other words, if Christians really understood our vocation in and to the world, we would already be the leaders in trying to "shore up the moral, social, and political environment," as Amitai Etzioni and the Communitarian Network are now urging us to do.

Pierce is co-publisher of ACTA Publications, Chicago.

☆☆ Coming Attractions ☆☆

Graduation

Publication Date: June 13

Advertising Deadline: May 30

(Bonus distribution to graduating students)



A look at the high school Class of '96 as its members prepare for life after high school. In addition to the annual listing of graduates' names, this special supplement also will contain feature articles on selected graduates, with special emphasis on their expectations and plans for the future.

Catholic Organization Directory

Publication Date: June 27

Advertising Deadline: June 13



The Diocese of Rochester is home to numerous organizations for lay Catholics — from fraternal and service groups to spiritual and prayer leagues. This special section will provide an opportunity for such groups to inform Courier readers about their histories, purpose and membership opportunities.

Health

Publication Date: July 18

Advertising Deadline: July 3



The Catholic Church's teaching on health-related issues stems from Scripture. This special supplement will offer readers an unique perspective on those issues while offering valuable information on modern health-care programs.

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