

COLUMNISTS

Catholics weigh 'both-and' issues in decisions

I once heard a wise interpreter of the Catholic moral tradition assure his audience that our approach to moral thinking is always much more a matter of "both-and" than it is a question of "either-or." We seek to hold tensions together. We want to give valid recognition to several different aspects of a question. For example we consult both Scripture and experience for wisdom to conduct our moral lives. Catholicism invites us to see the both-and of the questions we face.

I was reminded of this important key to understanding recently when I reread Pope John Paul II's encyclical "The Gospel of Life."

The document deals with the many ways in which modern societies fail to value human life. One passage in particular caught my attention. Located in paragraph 18, it reads:

"Decisions that go against life sometimes arise from difficult or even tragic situations of profound suffering, loneliness, a total lack of economic prospects, depression and anxiety about the future. Such circumstances can mitigate even to a notable degree subjective responsibility and the consequent culpability of those who make these choices which in themselves are evil."

It continues in the same paragraph, "But today the problem goes far beyond the necessary recognition of these personal situations. It is a problem which ex-



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ists at the cultural, social and political level, where it reveals its more sinister and disturbing aspect in the tendency ... to interpret ... crimes against life as *legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights.*"

Sometimes I am with those who seem to focus exclusively on the second section of that paragraph. For them, the only relevant moral issue is that the practice of abortion, for example, is accepted in our society as a valid method of contraception. Or, along these same lines, euthanasia and suicide are accepted as appropriate ways to relieve suffering.

Abortion and euthanasia, rejected in Catholic moral teaching because they kill human beings without justification, are morally reprehensible actions. So denouncing these practices is recognized to be our single moral duty in this regard.

In my opinion the passage from the

papal document urges us to maintain a connection between this very valid moral position and the acknowledgement that in particular cases, there can be circumstances that *mitigate to a notable degree* subjective responsibility for some actions of this kind.

We need to recognize that our tradition includes not only moral principles that are strong, clear and right; it also includes recognition that the subjective consciousness of the one performing the action, and the circumstances surrounding it, have an effect on the moral evaluation of the act and make moral claims on us too.

We have always granted significant weight to the individual's intention and relative degree of freedom — and unfreedom — exercised in choosing particular actions. Along with taking strong positions on moral issues, we have long recognized a subjective side to human sinfulness, a side we need to take into account in determining the ultimate level of guilt even when the most serious "objectively evil" actions are performed.

On the other hand I sometimes meet people who are very aware of the troubling circumstances that can contribute to choices that lead individuals to select abortion or to approve of euthanasia. Individuals of this mindset can give the impression that they do not want us to spend much energy opposing what the

document calls the sinister and disturbing aspects of our culture that can lead us to view crimes against life as somehow *legitimate expressions of individual freedom.*

Again, the passage from the document challenges that position, too. Even though we need to acknowledge the "profound suffering" and "lack of prospects" that can lead individuals to make tragic choices to end life in extreme circumstances, and even as we understand that personal guilt is diminished because of these sorts of situations, we still need to actively oppose those attitudes and practices that result in the direct killing of human beings.

In the document a single paragraph holds these two sides of this problem together. We would all do well to try to do the same. Circumstances and the intention of the individual performing any human action do profoundly affect the moral meaning of what we do. We need to acknowledge that, and we ought to be able to discuss its moral implications.

But at the same time, we ought not to let our appreciation for the way that individual circumstances affect the moral meaning of acts allow us to neglect our responsibility to denounce the evils of a death-dealing culture, and to work for the protection of all human life.

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

A columnist bids farewell

I have been writing this column on the connection between the Christian faith and daily work for some nine years. It is now time to move on, and so I want to say a special goodbye and thank you to the readers and the editors who have chosen to consider my comments.

I have received much more from this effort than I have given (which, by the way, I have found to be true of all good work).

Being forced to write every couple of weeks on the spirituality that can be found on our jobs, with our families, and in our communities has opened my eyes to the holiness that exists all around me. I no longer experience God as some inaccessible being who can only be encountered by getting away from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Instead, I discover the divine life in my dealings with colleagues and customers,



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work

BY GREGORY F. AUGUSTINE PIERCE

while parenting my three children and being a husband to my loving wife, and during my volunteer community and church activities.

I have also learned, in the process of writing this column, that I am not alone in this spiritual quest. Countless interviews, comments from readers, book reviews and observations of the work of others has convinced me that the path

to the divine transcendence lies directly through the ordinariness of daily life.

As mother and author, Margaret Hebblethwaite once wrote, "I often resent the time I spent tidying the house, doing the laundry, cleaning the kitchen. I must remind myself that this is a share in God's work, this is the task of creation — sorting, tidying, ordering, bringing harmony out of chaos ...

"God's work is never ended — nor is a mother's," she continued. "Creation was not just a 'big bang' in the beginning: It is an ongoing labor throughout time. It includes peak moments like childbirth and the tedious, daily tasks of tidying up."

The end of this column is certainly not the end of my personal spiritual journey. I intend to spend the next year writing a book on the spirituality of work that I hope will be a contribution

to the growing conversation on the topic.

Meanwhile, I encourage you to write your own "columns" on faith and work. They might take the form of journals or diaries; letters to friends or family; prayers, poems, stories or essays that you submit to various publications.

If you have no one else to share them with, send them to me at 4848 N. Clark Street, Chicago, IL 60640. I promise that I will read them and, where possible, share them with others.

The main thing I urge, no, plead with you, is that you never let "professional" spiritual teachers intimidate you or make you feel inadequate in your pursuit of your own spirituality. When we all meet in heaven, we'll have a good laugh at their expense!

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