

COLUMNISTS

Theology doesn't separate into neat packages

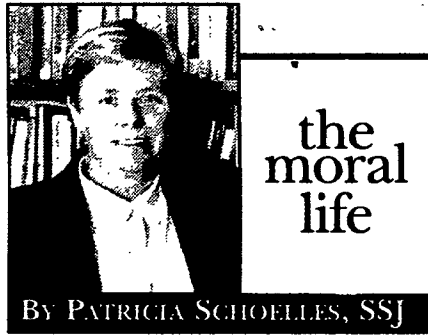
Sometimes I criticize theology for dividing things up into little packages.

At St. Bernard's and other schools of theology, for example, we have separate departments that cover the several areas of our teaching. We have departments and teachers devoted to moral theology, biblical theology, systematic theology and pastoral theology. All are distinct and separate disciplines, each responding to its own questions and method of study.

But, of course, faith itself does not operate in separate little arenas at all. Everything blends into one whole when we move from thinking about faith in an ordered way — theology — into "believing" itself.

And I even think that theology itself does its job best when it moves across "disciplines" and lets the various areas of thinking about faith "talk" with the other areas. Thus, there are many significant implications for the moral life that emerge from the fact that we claim the Eucharist as the "source and summit" of our faith life.

Some of these implications are very obvious, others require some thought. In the course of my own education, I still remember my first awareness that while the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all include a depiction of the scene where Jesus takes the bread and wine and institutes the Eucharist, John's Gospel does not include anything like this. But it does contain a story not



found in the other three Gospels: namely, Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

Now this fact has been interpreted in a variety of ways over the course of church history. For myself, I think most often about how the footwashing, with its obvious symbolism of serving others, conveys in a totally different way, what is of the essence of Eucharist.

For the author of the fourth Gospel, part of the meaning of the Last Supper must be understood and realized in the simple, humble acts of service that we are called upon to offer one another. Being a "eucharistic community" must entail being a "servant community" waiting on each other in concrete, simple, humble ways. There are several implications for the moral life that can be seen just from this rather obvious reflection on the account of the Eucharist found in the Gospels.

Paul's writings on Eucharist have

some important insights for the moral life, too.

In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul denounces the fact that a number of factions that have grown up among the community in Corinth. Not only this, but there is apparently a division between rich and poor people in the community, where a meal was apparently held in connection with the Eucharist. The problem seems to be that the richer members of the community are able to get there first, and they eat all the food themselves. Thus poorer folks are deprived of access to the meal, and the community is torn apart.

For Paul, this division into separate groups is so serious that "it is not the Lord's Supper that you are eating, since when the times comes to eat, everyone is in such a hurry to start his own supper that one person goes hungry while another is getting drunk" (1 Cor 11:20). In other words, divisions and factions within the community take away from our capacity for genuine celebration of Eucharist. And depriving others of food is tantamount to the destruction of the eucharistic communion itself.

We don't need vast amounts of instruction in moral theology to appreciate these insights into the claims at the very heart of our tradition. We simply need to reflect on some Scripture passages about Eucharist.

We may not need even much exposure to the Scriptures on this topic. A

question I have asked students of mine in the past is this: "What is the first thing we do when we attend Mass?"

Many answer quickly, "We make the sign of the cross."

Wrong.

The first thing we do to participate in Eucharist is come together as a community. We gather in one place. We assemble. We collect ourselves. We unite. We physically become the community that we are.

Eucharist requires that we come together as a community. And the intention is not just that we are physically gathered in one place without any other association with one another. The intention is that we ARE the genuine community that our gathering depicts. The intention is that the concrete humble acts of service symbolized in the footwashing are what characterize our community all week long, and provide the foundation for our Eucharist. The intention is that we are NOT a fractured community with rich people separated from poor people, with some members overindulging in the goods that others need, too.

We can become aware of some implications for our moral living just by thinking about what it means to say that we are a "eucharistic people" who take the body and blood of the Lord as our central act and sacrament.

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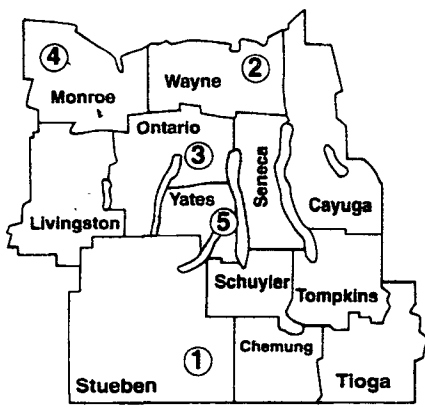
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