

COLUMNISTS

Take the initiative to end conflict

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 18:15-20. (R1) Ezekiel 33:7-9. (R2) Romans 13:8-10.

Have you ever noticed that wherever there are people, there are conflicts? Wherever two or three people are, there's going to be disagreement. It's true in business, in politics, and even in religion. Ever since Cain and Abel, conflict has been part of the human condition.

Unfortunately, an unresolved conflict often brings with it much pain.

During World War II, the Bunker Hill Air Force base in Indiana was near a cozy little chapel. Many of the airmen came there to be married. The church was wired for sound. Prior to the ceremony, religious records on an automatic changer would provide soft background music. In one service, everything went well until the words "for better or for worse, till death do us part." There was a click and over the speaker came a choral rendition of the World War II song, "Just Before the Battle, Mother."

There are battles going on in many homes today — battles between husbands and wives, battles between parents and teens. Sometimes those unresolved conflicts result in a lifetime of pain. So Jesus gave us advice about resolving conflicts.

Jesus said to take the initiative in resolving a conflict: "If your brother sins against you" In other words, you are



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

the injured party. Maybe your friend lied about you. Or maybe your friend took advantage of you. Do we huff and puff? Do we protest saying, "Hold on here. He sinned against me. Why should I go to him? He started it. Let him come to me."

Basically, that's pride. Sooner or later we are going to have to ask ourselves, which is more important: winning a battle or preserving a relationship? This is so important in family relationships. Are we committed to being right or to preserving and improving the relationship?

In the East marriages are often arranged by parents when the couple are just teenagers. In the West people tend to marry because they are attracted to another's appealing qualities: a fresh smile, wittiness, a pleasing figure, athletic ability, cheerful disposition, charm. Over time these qualities can change, especially the physical attributes. Meanwhile surprises may surface: slatternly house-

keeping, a tendency toward depression, disagreements over sex.

In contrast, partners in an arranged marriage do not center their relationship on mutual attractions. Having heard their parents' decision, the overriding question changes from "Whom should I marry?" to "Given this partner, what kind of marriage can we construct together?" Thus when conflicts come, the question is not "Who's right?" The question is, "What is best for the relationship?"

If your primary concern is the relationship, then you don't mind being the one who takes the first step in seeking reconciliation. That's true not only in marriage but in the workplace, with your neighbors, in the church, wherever relationships matter. Jesus says to us, "Take the initiative. If your brother sins against you, go to him, show him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."

A long time ago, a brief story appeared in *Reader's Digest* about how a town in Minnesota got its name. When people first began to settle there, the town had no name. When the population grew, the townspeople called a meeting to choose a name for their town. Many suggestions were made, but they couldn't agree on a name. The discussion soon became heated and quarrelsome. One man became so disgusted by

the way things were going that he jumped up, pounded his fist on the table shouting, "Let us have harmony!"

Someone present suddenly seized the idea and shouted back, "Yes! Let's have harmony." And the town got its name: Harmony, Minnesota.

Harmony is a wonderful thing to have in a community, a family, or a church. If harmony is going to take place, someone has to heed Jesus' advice: "Take the initiative."

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, N.Y.

Daily Readings

Monday, September 9

1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Luke 6:6-11

Tuesday, September 10

1 Corinthians 6:1-11;

Luke 6:12-19

Wednesday, September 11

1 Corinthians 7:25-31;

Luke 6:20-26

Thursday, September 12

1 Corinthians 8:1-7, 11-13;

Luke 6:27-38

Friday, September 13

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-27; Luke

6:39-42

Saturday, September 14

Numbers 21:4-9 or Philippians

2:6-11; John 3:13-17

'Dangerous memory' rearranges perspective

We are now revising our welfare system. Only days ago President Clinton signed the welfare reform bill. The media excitedly announced that the New Deal is over, 60 years of social policy is now at an end and that we stand on the brink of a whole new way of looking at poverty and unemployment.

For some of us, this moment has been too long in coming. To many of these people, the welfare system perpetuates the cycle of marginalization and disenfranchisement that victimizes many of our citizens. The critics charge that welfare relies too heavily on tax dollars, is inefficient, prone to abuse, unfair and runs counter to the basic tenets of capitalism.

But others lament the end of the welfare system. These people claim that welfare is a needed source of support for those people among us who are unable to participate in the work force in ways adequate to support families. This might be due to personal circumstances, market forces, insufficient numbers of well-paying jobs, lack of education or the way resources are allocated in our country. This group thinks that there is even now a continuing need for a system of welfare; they think our character as a people demands it.

My hunch is that we all tend to agree with one or the other of these two ways



the
moral
life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

of thinking. But in spite of different ways of thinking about this issue, we all have to accept the fact that social benefits as we have known them will inevitably diminish. We will all be affected by these changes, and we will all struggle with our responsibility toward those suffering from poverty, unemployment and the lack of opportunity.

As we grapple with these issues, we do well to let some principles from our faith tradition keep us from becoming complacent or uncaring about human need and vulnerability. I think, for example, about theologian Johannes Metz's use of the phrase "the dangerous memory of Jesus."

Metz reminds Christians of our culture's tendency to divide history and society into "winners and losers." Metz

charges that we too often focus only on those who enjoy the status of "winners" as we tell history or as we view current society.

He thinks we too easily ignore the "losers": those who live at the fringes of our culture, those whose work is undervalued and who do not benefit from the generation of wealth or access to social goods. One might think of the plight of migrant workers, for example, without whom the rest of us could not enjoy the foods we are able to buy at such reasonable prices. We all benefit because migrant workers work for such low wages; few of us are even aware of the deplorable housing and lack of benefits that migrants are forced to endure.

Professor Metz uses the phrase "the dangerous memory of Jesus," however, to suggest that the life story of Jesus places him squarely among society's losers. Jesus was himself born in a barn, he had neither material nor social "position," he was without power or wealth, he died a prisoner at the hands of the state, and his life project ended in dismal failure.

For Metz, the mission of the church includes keeping this memory of Jesus alive across the centuries. As we continually tell and retell the story of Jesus, we remind ourselves again and again that God himself lived among us on the

"losers' side" of the equation. In Jesus' life story the stories of all society's needy are represented, and we are made aware of their presence and their suffering.

This memory becomes "dangerous" because it incites us to see the world from the perspective of the poor instead of from the perspective of those whose needs are satisfied and whose abilities are valued. As we learn to view the world according to how its many arrangements affect the poorest and most vulnerable among us, we think and act differently. We might even take up positions that become "dangerous" for us because they put us in opposition to the conventional wisdom of the day.

I don't have the answer to welfare reform. I don't think anyone does, right now. I don't even think that church teaching with its wealth of wisdom can settle this complicated question for us, at least on its own. But I do think that one of the worst things that could happen would be for Christians to forget that the roots of our faith place us squarely on the side of those who benefit least from social and economic arrangements. Our call as Christians must be to speak and act on behalf of the poor whose voices go unheard.

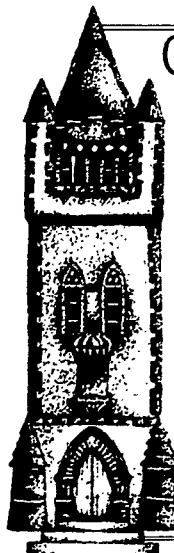
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