

COLUMNISTS

Faith must be interpreted for each era

I had occasion to visit a small relative over the Thanksgiving weekend. He is 10 years old. Unlike more polite company at the gathering, he and I used the occasion to discuss religion. I was impressed that he could recite the names of all seven sacraments and describe what each one "does." In this, he reminded me of myself and the training I received — almost two generations ago.

Of course, he used the term "reconciliation" for what I learned as "confession." And in practically every other item we discussed, this young Catholic did not know what I thought I knew at his age. I felt a temptation at that point to launch down a path often travelled by older Catholics: Out of a sense of loss about the "religious culture" we grew up in, we end up thinking that the current generation of young Catholics is "lost to ignorance" about Catholicism.

I resisted that temptation, and reflected instead about the fact that each generation of Catholics finds a "new" way to be Catholic. In fact I came to think about the fact that, as a church, we have all "grown up in faith" fairly successfully, given the enormous changes introduced after the Second Vatican Council.

My experience is that we are a more mature church today than we have been in the past. That means we are different from what we have been in the past, of



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

course. For example, most of us have come some distance in our understanding of authority in the church. This is illustrated by the fact that on a number of pastoral issues — birth control, homosexuality, divorce and remarriage, the women's movement — Catholics increasingly look to their own consciences and to other sources to decide how to respond to ethical dilemmas and to the practical questions that result from them.

Most of us have come to accept — and to appreciate! — the reality that the two great sources of religious authority in Catholicism, Scripture and tradition, constantly yield to new interpretations based on experience and reflection in the light of faith. These new interpretations lead to constant change in church life — changes that respond to our worship of the living God revealed in a changing world.

As we all know, however, change is stressful for all of us, and it can be nearly impossible for some of us. The ambiguity that was apparently "introduced" into Catholicism through the council seems to be almost diametrically opposed to the religion of "absolute truth and certainty" that we had known beforehand. I think I represent most American Catholics in admitting that, for me, the changes have led to a deepening of my faith and I remain grateful that faith is much more a part of my real life now.

I am grateful, too, for what I take to be a much better view of the limits of church authority than I had before. I appreciate the role that personal moral integrity plays in the course of trying to live in a way that is personally faithful to God. I am grateful for a new understanding that truth is an historical process that emerges over time and that it is never complete for any human being, or for any human institution — including the church.

I know that there are those who will read this column and shudder. For some Catholics — an increasingly small number, but an increasingly vocal group — the changes I'm describing here are hardly welcome ones. For these Catholics, truth is understood as absolute and unchanging. In their view, religious authority is equated with, and

pretty much limited to, papal pronouncements. Tradition is an unchanging "deposit of faith," the task of every Catholic is to obey church directives, disagreement with papal teaching should result in excommunication. Many people who think along these lines believe that *Humanae Vitae* should be proclaimed as an infallible teaching of the church, that the Latin Mass should be reinstated, that the roles of women must remain as they were in times past, that change is inconsistent with Catholicism. These opinions are based on the belief that truth is unchanging and unalterable and is available to the pope in a way that makes his understanding independent of the experience of the rest of the church. With most Catholics, I have grown beyond these views.

As you can see, my conversation with a small, decade-old Catholic led me on quite a journey! In the end, I think we need to admit that it is wrong to ignore the past, but it is wrong to make an idol of it, too. Church history tells us that the church does change and that it needs to change. Our fidelity to Scripture and tradition calls us to be open to the Spirit and not try to control the promptings of the living, loving God.

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

University students are 'priests' in truest sense

Every fall, university students are seen on television wildly cheering their alma maters to football victory. To most viewers, the ritual epitomizes the happy side of university life.

Recently I attended a presentation by students at The Catholic University of America to its board of regents. Their presentation surfaced an even happier side of university life that most of us don't get to see.

The first student told of bringing food to a homeless man. The student had listened patiently as the man talked of his plight. A month later he again met the man, who said: "The time you took to listen to me happened at a moment when I was contemplating suicide. Had you not taken the time, I would be dead today."

A student nurse recalled walking through a hospital corridor and suddenly feeling someone clinging to her legs. "I looked down and saw an orphan toddler starved for affection. I hugged him with all my heart," she told us, and then went on to say how deeply this in-



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BY FATHER EUGENE HEMRICK

cident heightened her sensitivity to young children without parents.

Another student said that he contacts non-Catholic students on campus and invites them to Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults classes to learn about Catholicism. Yet another student told of building a bonfire to attract students to an evening rosary.

"The idea hit me," she said, "that students like the mysticism of evening bonfires. So why not use them to provide a mystical atmosphere for the rosary?"

Students also told us of going into de-

pressed communities and inviting underprivileged youths to the campus in order to encourage them to think about the possibility of a college education.

Interestingly, most of the students making these presentations were taking difficult, challenging courses in the university, yet found time to be deeply involved in the campus' spiritual life.

What I found of greatest interest is that these students had formed themselves into a community that regularly meditates on Scripture in order to discover how their work connects with God's work.

As one student put it, "We reflect on Christ's resurrection and the wonder of it all, and also on his crucifixion and how those we serve are crucified. This keeps our work real. We see the glorious side of helping people and also its cross, which is to suffer with those we serve."

It struck me that the spiritual and corporal works of mercy these students perform reflect the priesthood they have been baptized into. So often we on-

ly think of ordained priests as having priesthood, yet in baptism everyone is baptized into a priesthood. It is a priesthood that makes us responsible for evangelizing just like those students did who invited others to hear of the church or to pray.

It encourages us to liberate people, as those students did who invited underprivileged youths to consider a college education, a pathway toward fully developing their potential.

That priesthood in which all in the church share knows that crucifixion is a part of life. With the student who listened to the homeless man, it is a priesthood that encourages us to listen and care, and in so doing to say, "I too am crucified with you."

Finally, these students exercise their priesthood effectively by coming together as a community to reflect on how social work becomes God's work.

Father Hemrick is director of diocesan relations at the Catholic University of America.

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