

COLUMNISTS

We have to draw the line, morally

For the last few weeks a group of us has been working on a program directed at answering the question: Can we keep our personal integrity and still live in the real world? Another way of phrasing it is: What if our job, our peers, life in general, seem to pull us in one direction, and our values pull us in the opposite direction? These questions hint at a basic experience of most Catholics today.

I think that we need to adopt a two-pronged approach as we struggle with this experience. First, we have to admit that we live in a world that is a mixture of good and evil. There is nothing, really, that is "absolutely pure," and our basic effort has to be to limit the bad and maximize the good.

We see this when we go to the voting booth: No single candidate exemplifies every value that aligns perfectly with our faith vision. We see it when we invest in the stock market: No corporation avoids every social ill that we have defined in light of our faith and basic vision of the good life. We see it when we make our decision to support the United Way or other fundraising campaigns: Even "good causes" do some things that are objectionable.

In real life, it appears that many of the



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

decisions we make really involve choosing the greater of two goods, or the lesser of two evils.

I've talked with people whose jobs put them in situations that illustrate this reality. A pharmacist friend described his dilemma in just this way: His job is good; he trained a long time for it; it pays well and offers terrific benefits. He does a great deal of good in his job, too. He is able to assist in the healing process for many sick people by preparing their medications. He gives advice and information that help people get well and stay well. All this is good, right in line with many Gospel stories, even.

Still, like most jobs we all hold, this man struggles with the parts of his work that

seem to oppose part of his belief system. Even though he is a Catholic, he fills prescriptions for contraceptives. He also struggles with some policies of the drug companies whose products he handles, since some of these companies conduct experiments using human tissue in a way he finds objectionable. The current health-care system poses moral difficulty for him, too, in the apparently unfair way that some people are deprived of care because they can't afford health insurance.

The dilemmas encountered in his profession are typical of the dilemmas we all encounter. We struggle every day to weigh the goods and degrees of evil present in our life situations, trying always to "maximize the good and limit the evils." Recognizing this can help us understand how we both participate in the good of our world while cooperating, to some degree, with its evils, too.

This brings me to the "second prong" of this scheme. We have to be prepared, I think, to "draw the line" at times, and to understand where, when, and why the line needs to be drawn. Admitting that we cannot find absolutely "pure" endeavors that avoid all cooperation with evil does not

mean that there won't be times when we have to recognize limits beyond which we simply will not go.

The pharmacist I referred to above has refused to fill prescriptions for RU486, for example, since this drug is used to directly induce abortions. He has thought about the issue carefully, and has decided that he cannot, in conscience, personally handle this product. His decision exemplifies what I am calling the "second prong" here. He isn't abandoning his job or his profession. He recognizes that he will, in some ways, cooperate with "evil" in the course of his work. He recognizes that in spite of this, there are significant goods that also result from his work.

Still, he doesn't abandon his obligation to "draw the line" when a proposed action violates his integrity by demanding a degree of cooperation with evil that is simple intolerable. I think this is the central moral task for all of us in this regard: forming consciences informed and certain enough to establish moral limits, while still allowing us to participate in the "real world."

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History engenders optimism about divisions

"With all the diversity in the church, what can we realistically expect of programs that attempt to better unify Catholics?"

This question struck me as I read "The Kind of Common Ground Sought" (*Origins*, March 27, 1997), an address given by Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb of Mobile, Ala., at St. Mary of the Lake University in Mundelein, Ill.

Archbishop Lipscomb has assumed leadership of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, which Cardinal Joseph Bernardin had created to encourage unity among polarized Catholics.

As I read Archbishop Lipscomb's address, the thought of all the divisive issues that confront the church made me wonder if seeking unity is a futile exercise.

For example, can we ever hope to see liberals and conservatives agree? Many liberals believe the best approach to those who dissent from a Catholic teaching is persuasion. They feel you get more bees with honey than vinegar. But



the human side

BY FATHER EUGENE HEMRICK

many conservatives maintain we have the truth, and dissenters must be handled firmly and without giving an inch.

Will the church ever be able to find a common ground for those angered over women's issues such as women's ordination?

Will the Common Ground Initiative ever quell the cry of some Catholics who feel that racism still exists in the church?

Can it ever come to terms with those who feel Rome is dictating to a country it doesn't understand?

Today we live in a society that is heavily influenced by forceful individualism. Many people believe they should be consulted and have a say on all matters. No longer do people fear to disagree with the church on some point, as they once might have.

In the midst of so much individualistic thinking, what can the Common Ground Initiative really achieve? I believe history might help answer this.

History teaches us that there never was, nor will there ever be perfect unity in the church. Just as St. Peter and St. Paul had disagreements, we can expect the same. In fact, many of those past disagreements are the reason the church is as strong as it is. They caused the church to rethink positions that needed updating.

History also teaches that there were much greater disagreements in past ages than we presently experience. As divided as we may feel we are, it is nothing compared to the past.

But whenever there was division, the church was blessed with movements sim-

ilar to the current Common Ground Initiative. Although it often took decades to accomplish unity, and the church endured schisms, name-calling and even wars, it has always managed to resolve most of its differences. Given all the diversity it has faced, the church's batting average has been excellent.

That's why I think we have reason to hope that the Common Ground Initiative will create a historic moment similar to past historical moments.

But just as patience was needed in the past, we need patience today. It takes time to achieve the unity we desire.

And we should expect that when unity is achieved, it won't approximate the total unity envisioned by those responsible for the present initiative.

Most of all, we ought to expect a new breath of hope in the church. An issue is being addressed that long has been siphoning away precious church energy.

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

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