

# COLUMNISTS

## To become good, be good

Like many of us, Aristotle asked the question, "How do we become good?"

Like few of us, Aristotle had an answer — and a terrific one at that. He gave us a three-part program for character formation. He said to become good, we should watch what the good person does, do likewise and gradually we will become good.

I like this answer because it is concrete, understandable and it roots the moral life in the community to which people belong, rather than in abstract principles or a lot of obscure knowledge. Let's consider the three parts of Aristotle's answer.

He says that in our quest for goodness, the first thing we need to do is observe what "the good person" does. In a move ignored and even shunned by many other moralists, Aristotle grounds the formation of moral character in personal example. Good people get that way by having access to other people performing concrete acts that are worthy of imitation.

For Aristotle, we need a community that exposes us to concrete pictures of what good actions look like. Without good example, we simply can't form or



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

educate good people. Knowing principles isn't the right starting point. We need pictures of what goodness looks like.

One of the reasons that St. Thomas Aquinas found Aristotle so adaptable to Christianity, I suppose was the fact that our central religious book is a book of stories showing the acts of Jesus. The stories of Jesus become a collection of depictions of "good examples" for us to imitate. "Watch what the good person does," says Aristotle. The communion of saints functions that way, too. "Watch what all these good people do."

The people in our church, in our fami-

ly, in our neighborhood, at work, can all offer us concrete pictures of good people doing good actions, so that these communities actually become "schools of virtue" for us. So do stories we hear that depict people performing concrete good actions. Of course, the contrary is also true: People who are deprived of exposure to pictures of goodness probably have trouble "becoming good."

The second part of Aristotle's thesis tells us to "do likewise." Becoming good isn't necessarily a matter of knowing more. The technique for becoming a good person is to perform acts that are good.

This works because what we do shapes how we come to see the world. Our actions come to shape what we want in the world. Our actions actually contribute to who we become. People who perform concrete loving acts for others become loving people in their hearts. People who tell the truth become honest people. People who fulfill their responsibilities become dependable people. People who perform concrete acts of service to the poor develop a love, respect and under-

standing for those who are in need.

This leads to the third aspect of Aristotle's thesis. He points out that goodness develops over time. What happens to us as we perform good actions is that gradually our wants take new shapes. We come to want better ends in life, we come to strive for nobler goals.

Aristotle understood that becoming good happens in community with others from whom we can learn. It happens gradually, over time. It is a process, not a single, isolated, discrete decision. It is rooted in the concrete actions we perform. Aristotle understood that "doing good" by itself doesn't automatically or instantly mean that we are good. Being good requires a lifetime of letting ourselves be shaped by good example and by our own good actions. Gradually we learn to see the world the way good people see it. Gradually we learn to want in and for the world what a good person wants. Gradually, we become good.

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## Failure to heed advice weakens Catholic colleges

Thirty years ago, a group of leading Catholic educators met at Land O'Lakes, Wis., to plan the future of their institutions. Their intention was to implement the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. The unintended consequence of their decisions was the secularization of American Catholic colleges and universities.

The Land O' Lakes meeting took place under the shadow of a 12-year-old essay: Msgr. John Tracy Ellis' indictment of Catholic intellectual life in America, which originated in a lecture to the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs and was published in the Autumn 1955 issue of *Thought*.

Ellis was responding to the British critic Dennis Brogan, who had argued that "in no modern Western society is the intellectual prestige of Catholicism lower than in the country where, in such respects as wealth, numbers, and strength of organization, it is so powerful." Msgr. Ellis, the leading American Catholic church historian of the day, believed that Brogan's judgment was incontestable, and he set out to explain why things had come to this unhappy pass.



the catholic difference

By GEORGE WEIGEL

Forty-plus years later, I am less interested in whether Ellis was right in pleading guilty to Brogan's charge than in two facts about the controversy that Ellis provoked.

The first is that Ellis' supporters and Ellis' critics alike agreed that there was such a thing as a distinctively Catholic intellectual life. And the second is that Ellis proposed, not an abandonment of what was classically Catholic about the intellectual life of Catholic campuses, but rather a market strategy: Catholic colleges and universities should find their unique market niche by strengthening their advantage in the humanities and liberal arts.

Had Ellis' strategy been followed,

Catholic colleges and universities would now be leading the reform of an American higher education system that has decomposed into a miasma of political correctness and intellectual infantilism.

But the Land O' Lakes meeting ignored Ellis' prescription, in part because the conferees read Brogan's indictment through the distorting prism of a "liberal/conservative" political analysis of Vatican II. As a result, the meeting decided to make Catholic higher education "independent" from the hierarchy and from the guidance of the religious orders that had been so instrumental in their establishment. Authority was the burning issue of the day, and the models of educational excellence were those once-religious Ivy League institutions that had long since abandoned links to their founding churches.

The timing, of course, couldn't have been worse. To take Harvard as your model at precisely the moment when Harvard was imploding — intellectually and morally — does not, in retrospect, seem a very perspicacious decision. And the failure to seize on Ellis' "comparative advantage" strategy by developing Catholic higher ed-

ucation on a firm liberal arts foundation has not only led to a general decline of what was once the great strength of Catholic colleges and universities, it has blown an enormous, historic opportunity.

The Vatican's recent request for a more thorough American implementation of Pope John Paul II's guidelines for Catholic colleges and universities (in the apostolic letter "Ex Corde Ecclesiae") drew a predictably negative reaction from Catholic higher educators. Which suggests that the failures of the Land O'Lakes meeting have not been adequately measured, or their causes accurately analyzed.

The dominant attitude parallels Father Richard McBrien's: Catholic universities are closed shops, whose affairs are solely the business of the academicians' guild.

There is a very peculiar concept of church at work here. As long as it prevails on Catholic campuses, the opportunity for Catholic institutions to be reformers in the broader intellectual culture is going to be lost.

George Weigel is a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

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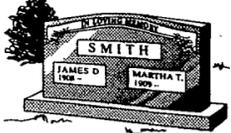
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