

COLUMNISTS

Moral teachings respond to change

A small headline in the Sept. 9 edition of the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* caught my attention. The headline proclaimed: "Vatican City: A stronger stance on death penalty." The opening sentence read: "The Vatican is taking a stronger stand against the death penalty in a new teaching that reflects Pope John Paul II's opposition to capital punishment in all but the most extreme cases."

Further down a Vatican official was quoted as saying that "the new teaching 'narrowed' the grounds for which capital punishment is morally accepted."

Then in its Sept. 11 issue, the *Catholic Courier* included a fuller treatment of the same item.

"The definitive Latin edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church contains a hundred adjustments to the original text, including strengthening its position against the death penalty"

"The most notable change to the text, first published in 1992, was the section on capital punishment, which was changed to reflect Pope John Paul's arguments against the death penalty in his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life).

The new position holds that "with the resources and possibilities available to governments today for restraining criminals, cases of the absolute necessity of



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

the suppression of the offender 'are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.'" (After the *Courier* went to press, this statement was clarified to read, "... the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.'")

Cardinal Ratzinger is quoted as stating, "It seems to me it would be very difficult to meet the conditions (for use of the death penalty) today."

I don't really want to comment on the church's teaching on the death penalty in this column. What I want to focus on is the fact of development and change in that teaching. Occasionally I read or hear comments that give the impression that some people think that the church's position on moral issues should never change, or that human beings have some absolute, unchanging,

universal, timeless knowledge of morality that eliminates our responsibility to continue thinking about moral issues or closes off the possibility of change in church pronouncements about morality.

That simply isn't the case, and it never has been. Moral teachings require a sort of knowledge that is simply different from the kind of knowledge we have about facts ("the sun is 93,000,000 miles from earth") or systems (10+5=15). Moral teaching is about real life. This means that it requires a kind of knowledge that is always incomplete, that responds to the ever new situations that make up human life, that admits of new insights all the time.

This "never finished" character of our moral knowledge and of the church's teaching is illustrated clearly in the progression from the 1992 edition of the Catechism through Pope John Paul's 1995 encyclical to the 1997 revisions of the Catechism.

The pope took the traditional teaching on the death penalty to a new level. Times have changed. Governments today are more able than they were in the past to restrain evildoers without killing them. The pope acknowledges this and issues a stronger prohibition against the death penalty than has been part of

church teaching in the past. He explains very clearly the reasons that have prompted him to assume this new moral position.

I suppose there are some who greeted the 1992 edition of the Catechism with the hope that, since it was the *official* catechism of the church, it would also be the final edition. Finished. Complete. Absolutely certain. No questions left. No more change. Even ... infallible?

A moral teaching specific enough to address the real life questions that confront humankind is also a teaching that must remain open to change and reformulation. Rather than fearing this or letting it increase our anxiety, we might reflect for a few minutes about how the concrete example of the death penalty shows that change in official church teaching does indeed occur, it involves even the pope, it need not be destructive and when done well it is based on reasons we can understand and continue to think about (even when, as sometimes happens, we may not be able to agree with it right away).

This will always be true of the church's moral teaching "until He comes again in glory."

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

Kids' Chronicle

Last week we inadvertently failed to provide the answers to the Kids' Chronicle puzzle. The answers were:
1. fish 2. salt 3. grain 4. figs 5. grapes 6. mustard 7. bread.

We regret the error.

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Donna Steichen is a wife, mother and journalist who has long been a leader in Catholic Pro-life and Educational organizations. She is the author of *UNGODLY RAGE: THE HIDDEN FACE OF CATHOLIC FEMINISM*.


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