COLUMNISTS

Some church teachings rise from laity

the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

In this column two weeks ago I wrote about recent changes in church teaching on the death penalty. As I noted, the most recent edition of the New Catechism is being altered to bring it into line with the stronger position that Pope John Paul II adopts in his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae.*

This example of change in an official church teaching shows how a pope takes a position that leads to alteration in an important document. There are other examples that show the process of change proceeding along other courses. In fact, it can be shown that the church's teachings actually develop over time. They are officially proclaimed after many years of experience, action and discussion by laity and clergy all over the world. In the case of the moral teachings especially, development and change occur "from the bottom up" as much as "from the top down."

It may seem surprising to some readers, but every document and teaching promulgated in the church has a history. They do not pop "already made" exclusively from the mind of a pope, but rather follow much interaction and discussion that ordinarily begins among the laity and pastors.

Take for example Pope Leo XIII's ground-breaking encyclical *Rerum novarum* ("On the Condition of Labor"). That work, issued in 1891, inaugurated what has now become the 100-plus year tradition of modern Catholic social teaching. The encyclical officially moved the church to side with the efforts of workers who sought to improve labor conditions. In particular, *Rerum novarum* endorsed associations of workers akin to labor unions.

But the issuing of this encyclical actually followed upon a long history of activity, reflection and debate by Catholics at all levels of the church. For example, on the theoretical side, an Italian Jesuit named Aloysius Taparelli wrote much showing how Catholic principles and ideals ought to influence social and political organizations. Fr. Taparelli died in 1862, and his main works were published 40-50 years before Pope Leo's encyclical, which adopted many of Taparelli's themes.

In Germany a bishop, Baron Von Ketteler (1811-1877) became aware of the misery and poverty of the working classes. He was also aware of the birth of socialism in Germany, and became convinced that Christians, not socialists, ought to be confronting the need for social reform. German Catholics were stirred into significant social action because of Von Ketteler's sermons, pamphlets and books. All of this action and writing preceded and led up to the 1891 encyclical.

In France during the 1870s clergy and other leaders joined forces to help Catholic Workingmen's Clubs bring about social reform. These associations became important precursors to the sort of unions that Pope Leo advocated in his later encyclical. Priests, bishops and laity were all involved in the action, thinking and writing that preceded and led up to the encyclical.

This pattern of lay and clerical involvement was not restricted to Germany and France. In Belgium and Switzerland, Spain, Holland, Ireland and the United States, Catholics initiated movements directed at alleviating the miserable working conditions that accompanied the industrial revolution. Their involvement stemmed from their religious convictions and the responsibility they felt to apply them.

It was this sort of activity that led to the formulation of a whole new body of church teaching on social issues. It began not in Rome at the "top" of the organized church. It was actually initiated through the experience of ordinary Catholics and the pastors who responded to their struggles and suffering.

By the time Pope Leo wrote his encyclical in 1891, the church had been through much activity and discussion, had sifted through some false starts and directions, had debated and disagreed, had suffered and purified its stance on a critically important issue affecting the lives of thousands. None of this harmed or diminished the church. In fact, it resulted in the Gospel being applied in a new way to a new dimension of life; and that, after all, does not diminish the mission of the church — it fulfills it.

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Good deeds made deepest impression

essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Is there anything left to be written about Mother Teresa and Diana, Princess of Wales, that hasn't already been written? Perhaps not, but this week's column will attempt what may be the impossible.

In spite of the enormous differences of their lives, Mother Teresa and Princess Diana had something of profound importance in common. Both used their international celebrity to focus the world's attention on the sick, the poor and the socially marginalized.

The positive effect of Diana's good works is reflected in the unprecedented donations to the foundation erected in her memory and to the charitable causes with which she had been publicly identified.

And how else can one explain the emotionally intense reaction of gays and lesbians, for example, to Diana's death? Time and again, she reached out to those suffering from AIDS, grasping their hands, sitting by their sides.

Millions of ordinary people readily identified with her. Many women saw her as a survivor like themselves, who tried to make the best of an often unhappy life. Although the product of a broken home and then of a broken marriage to a man who loved someone else, her two children were always her first priority. She would relinquish her royal title as part of the divorce settlement to insure her continued access to her sons.

Mother Teresa's life was much less complicated and glamorous. She seemed to move naturally and effortlessly into religious life and the founding of her own religious community (the Missionaries of Charity), laying out for herself a life of absolute devotion and service to the most destitute of human beings.

Although universally admired and loved, Mother Teresa, in death, did not evoke the kind of intensely emotional reaction that Princess Diana's clearly elicited, except in India.

The irony is that ordinary people seemed to identify more readily with the tall and beautiful Diana, aristocrat and princess, than they did with the diminutive and utterly plain Mother Teresa, a woman who could claim only three $1-saris in her entire wardrobe. No lucrative auction at Sotheby's for that!

Immediately after their deaths, both were being spoken of as saints, so much so in Princess Diana's case that her brother Charles (Earl) Spencer, had to warn against the tendency to canonize her.

In the early church, however, both women would have been proclaimed saints by popular will, since it was not until the 13th century, under Alexander III, that the authority to canonize was reserved to the popes.

Three additional points about the deaths of these two vastly different women:

First, isn't it remarkable that, in the reactions of people around the world, the apparent moral lapses in Princess Diana's private life were of no apparent concern?

That she sought human comfort and affection, and longed for love, even while occasionally pushing the envelope of traditional moral propriety, was not held against her.

To be sure, if Mother Teresa were to be found later on to have led a double life, with secret bank accounts in Switzerland and gambling expeditions to Monte Carlo in state-of-the-art disguises, her chances for canonization would evaporate more quickly than a drop of water on a hot frying pan. But many ordinary people seem capable of making precisely those kinds of moral adjustments.

What is expected of a Mother Teresa is not necessarily expected of a Princess Diana. It is for their good works for others, not for their private behavior, that they are celebrated and honored.

Second, wouldn't every parish love to have a lay lector as good as Prime Minister Tony Blair? Have you ever heard a Scriptural passage read with greater intelligence or with such eloquence as he read St. Paul's hymn to charity?

Third, there was one major lapse in the media's coverage of Diana's funeral. The only truly excellent element of the service that seemed to be totally ignored was the Archbishop of Canterbury's extraordinary series of prayers, not only on behalf of the princess but of so many of the world's needs. Would that all of our bishops and clergy could pray so well in a forum so public as that.

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