

COLUMNISTS

Actions shape who we become

In the last column I tried to make the point that "keeping the law" is not the core of religious faith, or even of the moral life. That is our relationship with God. To stay on balance, I should use this column to point out some of the reasons why our actions are, nevertheless, very important in the conduct of a life lived in relationship with God and with the community of the church.

In a space this size, of course, we can't possibly offer a thorough treatment of this topic. But we can say a few things.

First, moral thinkers have always associated a certain meaning with human actions. The meaning that individual actions have, can reinforce our intentions. That's why so many religious and social groups insist on marriage as the appropriate context for sexual intercourse. Intercourse is an action that carries with it a whole host of meanings, including commitment to the other and deep love for one another. Casual sex as a form of recreation or exclusively for pleasure, contradicts this meaning of the action. Thus, insisting that sex belongs in marriage upholds and supports the meaning of the act of sexual intercourse.

In the same way, the meaning of individual actions can contradict intentions that we have, too. That's part of the reason why so many religious groups, in-



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

cluding our own, dismiss the possibility of "mercy killing" or euthanasia. To kill someone carries with it a meaning that is not consistent with caring for someone. We can do a great deal for a suffering and dying person: we can faithfully visit or stay with them, we can provide comfort care for them, we can help sedate their pain, pray with and for them, help them make arrangements for their possessions after they are gone. But to actively kill them, even with the intention of relieving their suffering, contradicts the meaning of "to care for." Killing an individual is simply not consistent with caring for someone; the meaning of the action is opposed to the intention we may have.

Thus, in conducting a life lived in relationship with God, some actions must be avoided simply because their defini-

tion and meaning oppose our intention of loving God.

In addition to this question of making our actions significant for the Christian life, is the issue of the effect that our actions have on the person we become. It is widely recognized that we can tell something about people by the actions they perform. But it is often overlooked that our actions actually determine the sort of person we are. Our individual acts actually form us. Not only do we determine our actions; our actions also help to shape us.

We can cite many examples of this. Honest people get that way by individual acts of truth telling. By repeatedly and consistently deciding to speak truthfully, an honest person develops within herself a habit of almost "automatically" responding to life situations in a truthful way. Honest people "see" the world as a truth-teller sees the world, and they respond to the widely differing circumstances we all face in a consistently honest way. In the same way dependable people are not simply "born that way." Dependable people are those who have been responsible in fulfilling their individual commitments over a long period of time. They have developed a habit of reliability. They can be counted on because they performed individual actions

in the past that were trustworthy. Now they are consistent and steady, almost automatic, in fulfilling their duties. Their past actions shaped the sort of self they have become.

The reason that churches have teachings about human behavior is that they recognize that actions shape people. Maintaining a relationship with God demands that we become *this* sort of person rather than *that* sort of person. We have to develop certain traits of character — patterns of seeing the world and acting in it. And the character we develop is dependent on the actions we perform.

Thus, the Christian life demands that we avoid certain behaviors, not just of primarily because they are against a rule or law, but because they will help to shape the sort of person we become. For example, the Third Commandment says we should "keep holy the Lord's day." In the light of what we've said here, this commandment requires that we become the sort of person who is able and ready to worship God. We keep the commandment not just because "it's the law," but because it indicates what sort of people Christians need to be.

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

Jesus' was popular baby name

Q. As my children and I were discussing Christmas, one of them asked why Mary and Joseph named their baby Jesus.

I told them that was the name God wanted the baby to have, but they weren't satisfied. Nothing more came to my mind, so we decided to ask.

Was there any special meaning to that name? If so, what was it?
(Louisiana)

A. As you say, according to the Gospels the name "Jesus" did come from God through an angel to Mary (Lk. 1:31) and in a dream to Joseph (Mt. 1:21).

The name in other forms, Joshua in particular, has a long history in Hebrew culture. Two particular facts seem to stand out in Christian tradition, however, as it applies to our Lord.

First, Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, a name which in Hebrew means "God



question corner

BY FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

(Yahweh) helps," or more popularly "God saves."

It is this second meaning that Matthew picks up on, reporting that the name was bestowed on Jesus "because he will save his people from their sins."

For Matthew it also carried the connotation, always a central theme in that Gospel, that the salvation Jesus brings is

not individualistic, but a community, a "church" event. Jesus would save "his people."

Second, the name was not unique. People often called their children Jesus in those days. Paul refers to a Jewish Christian of that name (Col. 4:11), and it appears in other literature of the same period.

The same remains true today in some places. One may recall the child, obviously a baseball fan, who asked, "If Jesus was a Jew, why does he have a Puerto Rican name?"

The implication is that Jesus received a very common name, one that did not immediately separate him from the human family, but helped to identify him with it.

You don't mention how old your children are. If some of this is a little over their heads, perhaps you can translate it for them.

Dear Father Dietzen: In your recent column about references to Jesus Christ in early nonbiblical literature, you do not name the Roman historian Tacitus, last heard of about 114 A.D.

He speaks of the Christians, whose "founder, one Christus, was put to death by the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor" (Annals XV.44).

Tacitus was about one generation earlier than Suetonius, whom you do mention.

(Illinois)
A. I'm grateful to the priest, a professor of Latin literature, for the information. It's nice to have smart classmates.

...
Father Dietzen is pastor of Holy Trinity Church, 704 N. Main St., Bloomington, Ill. 61701. Questions may be sent to him at the same address.

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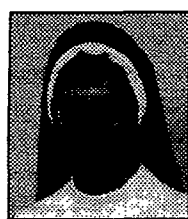


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