

Questions about beliefs switch course

Different eras ask different questions about God and faith. St. Anselm lived in England during the 11th century and characterized a whole epoch in the history of theology when he defined theology as "faith seeking understanding." What Anselm expressed in that wonderful phrase was the dominant question that characterized the quest of religious believers and thinkers of his time and for centuries beyond that as well. The main thrust of inquiry into God and faith then seemed to be: "How can we understand our faith convictions? What do they mean intellectually? What is right and wrong about our expressions of faith?"

During the centuries when this question dominated theology and church life, we witnessed many theological treatises written about how believers should understand their faith convictions. "Summas," or collections of questions and answers about faith written by religious thinkers, began to appear from every Catholic university. The purpose of these treatises was to offer a comprehensive explanation of the intellectual meaning of the beliefs held by Christian believers.

Accordingly, church conflicts during that time centered on labelling the various explanations that were offered either "right" or "wrong." Those who were determined to explain things wrongly were



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

urged to change their explanations and "get it right," or be denounced as heretics. During this period whole new churches were formed because of differing intellectual explanations about what the tenets of our belief system meant in an intellectual sense.

Today the major question about God and faith seems to be different. Today our major question about belief is not "How can we understand our faith?" but "How can we live our faith?" As we begin the 21st century, we seem not to be as concerned with intellectual formulations of faith, as with practical implications about how we should live our faith.

When we ask this sort of question, we seem not to be asking, either, about "how can we keep 'the rules' set down by authorities?" Today's inquiry seems to be different from the questions we asked even a generation ago. When today's be-

lievers ask, "How can we live our faith?" they seem not to be asking, "How far can I go before I commit a mortal sin?" or "What behaviors violate the laws of my religion?"

In fact, moral theologians today are noticing that our questions about "living our faith" have shifted significantly even in the time many of us have moved through Catholic childhood to adulthood. When once we seemed to be asking about our behavior from a kind of "minimalist" perspective ("How little can I do and still get to heaven," "What actions will keep me out of heaven?" or "What's a sin and how serious is it?"), we now appear to be asking: "How can I respond to Jesus' invitation to love God with all my heart, and love my neighbor as myself?"

Today our questions are not phrased from a negative perspective, but from a more positive perspective that asks: "How can I do more? How can I love God more and more? How can I love my neighbor in the concrete and make the world closer to what God wants?" Our focus is not so much on "What's a mortal sin?" but "What does love look like in the concrete, and how can I make it grow?"

Another shift in the questions we seem to be asking about living our faith relates to understanding our actions

from a purely physical perspective. Critics today point out that we used to almost exclude consideration of the emotional meaning of our actions. In the recent past we understood our actions primarily from the perspective of their physical structure alone. This meant that we excluded important considerations about the emotional meaning of our actions.

Today we ask about the emotional meaning of our actions, too. This is shown in the area of marriage, for example. In an earlier period we talked about "primary" and "secondary" ends of marriage: Procreation of children was the "primary" purpose of marriage, nurturing the love between spouses was "secondary." But today we recognize that the love between the spouses cannot be separated from or made secondary to "procreation" because conceiving, loving and raising children depends on the emotional bonds established between the couple.

Today's questions about faith are neither purely intellectual nor precisely the ones we asked about actions in the past. Today faith seeks not so much intellectual understanding as praxis: We want to know especially how we can live our growing love for God.

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

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