

Our actions help to form our beliefs

A theologian I know treats the problem of "unbelief" in an unexpected way. He advises people who find their faith to be weak, to get up and do something for someone in need.

I find this a surprising response because ordinarily I separate our thought processes from practical action and doing. If I hear someone describe a condition of weak faith, I usually assume that that person should read something, say some prayers, take a class about faith, or talk to someone in their parish who could present sound reasons for believing the truth of faith.

Since "belief" sounds like it's a "head activity," we quite naturally tend to nurture and tend it by *thinking* in certain ways.

But the comments of some very wise Christians challenge us to look at our Christian faith from a slightly different angle. They remind us that Christianity is not a way of thinking so much as it is a way of being in the world. It relies on action as an initiator and guide to thought.

What this means is that we actually shape the thoughts and attitudes we have about God through the actions and practices we engage in. Instead of appreciating our actions as applied after



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

we have formed our thoughts or beliefs, some Christian thinkers today encourage us to recognize that our thoughts and beliefs actually *follow* our actions.

A practical example of this might come from our efforts to pray. If we find that we are not praying, we might assume at first that we should read a book on prayer, or listen to a talk about prayer, or think more about praying. While all of those approaches would probably be very good for us, a better first step might be: "Just do it." Simply pray. By repeating that action over time, we can actually form a habit of prayer so that we almost "automatically" become a praying person. This happens not because we change our thinking about prayer, but because we change our activity and simply do it.

Another example comes from a desire we may have to love those in need. One strategy would be to search for some inspiring words that would change our hearts or enliven a loving attitude in our minds. But we should not overlook the importance of just undertaking some practical action on behalf of those in need. Sometimes, changing our actions becomes the catalyst for changing our hearts.

We can make parallels of this basic concept in many areas of human life. If we want to become honest people, we might imagine that we should think more about honesty or learn about its value and definitions. A better approach would be to begin to tell the truth. As we repeat the action of truth telling in the real situations of our lives, we gradually form a habit of honesty, and become "automatic" tellers of the truth.

It is this principal that stands at the heart of a great strand of Catholic spirituality known as the imitation of Christ, or the following of Jesus. The idea behind this spirituality is that to know Christ, we should act as he did. He relieved people's suffering and so should we. He confronted injustice and false religion, and so should we. He put God's mission first in his life, and so should we.

He was not attached to status or material wealth or power, and we should live that way too.

The theologian Johannes Metz tells us that: "The truths of Christianity after all can never be thought of in such a way that they are merely thought of. The content of Christian teaching is a matter of practical action." Metz notes that, "Knowledge of Christ is never pure knowledge; rather, Christ is always to be thought of in such a way that he's not simply thought of."

In these passages Metz is taking the way we usually approach these questions and standing it right on its head. He's turning it upside down. Instead of telling us to think and learn about Christ and then apply that knowledge in our lives, Metz is telling us that we will actually come to know the living Christ through acting as he did. The knowing follows the doing. Action becomes the path to knowledge, and not vice versa.

In this view, Christianity might capture a phrase from contemporary advertising and apply it to faith. If you want to know God more and become a better believer, just do it.

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Abortion decisions did not settle the issue

Twenty-five years ago the U.S. Supreme Court summarily stripped an entire class of human beings of the protection of the laws. *Roe vs. Wade* and its companion case, *Doe vs. Bolton*, created a regime of abortion on demand unprecedented in the world's democracies.

In the quarter-century since that exercise in "raw judicial power" (as Justice Byron White called it), the abortion license has been the most bitterly contested issue in American public life. Politicians wish it would just go away. But it will not go away because it cannot go away, and for the gravest of constitutional reasons. Until the court's lethal error in *Roe* is reversed, the American promise of liberty and justice for all is a bounced check. There is no private "right" to lethal violence in a law-governed society.

The abortion debate has been confused by extraordinary levels of deception on the part of *Roe*'s defenders. Two recent examples illustrate the point.

On the victim of the abortion license: Hailing a diagnostic technique that permits abortions eight to 10 days after conception, Dr. Michael Burnhill of the Planned Parenthood Federation had this to say: "With these very early abortions, we're talking about a whole gestational



the catholic difference

By GEORGE WEIGEL

sac that's the size of a matchstick head. It's nobody's picture of a little baby sucking its thumb." So what happens in this kind of abortion? A tiny "gestational sac" is "removed" — sort of like an appendix, right? And an appendix is "nobody's picture of a little baby sucking its thumb."

But that "gestational sac" is exactly what Dr. Michael Burnhill looked like when he was 10 days old. That's what you looked like in your second week of life, gentle reader. Do you imagine yourself to have been nothing more than an appendix, back then? Does Dr. Burnhill?

Elementary logic tells us that nothing that is now a human being was ever anything other than a human being. And nothing that will become a human being is ever anything other than a human being.

ing. That "gestational sac" is what a human being is supposed to look like at that stage of development. Denying reality doesn't change it.

On the range of the abortion license: The *Los Angeles Times* recently conducted a poll on public attitudes toward abortion. The first question read, "As you may know, in 1973 the United States Supreme Court handed down a landmark decision, called *Roe vs. Wade*, which essentially accepted abortion in principle. Generally speaking, are you in favor of the Supreme Court decision which permits a woman to get an abortion from a doctor at any time within the first three months of her pregnancy, or are you opposed to that...?" Fifty-nine percent favored the proposition, and the *Times* duly announced that Californians supported *Roe*.

The problem is that the poll completely misrepresented the court's finding in *Roe vs. Wade*. With its companion case, *Doe vs. Bolton*, *Roe* created a regime of virtually unregulated abortion on demand, for any reason whatsoever, at any time in a pregnancy. *Roe* did not limit abortion to the first trimester of pregnancy, any more than *Dred Scott* limited slavery to blacks born in Africa. Under the *Roe* regime, a woman in her eighth month can

declare "pregnancy termination" essential to her "mental health" and obtain the abortion of a viable unborn child. And she need not obtain the abortion from a doctor.

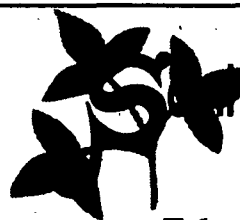
Systematic, willful misrepresentation of the range of the abortion license created by *Roe* and *Doe* has confused public debate for a quarter century. Might the defenders of *Roe* and their allies in the national media do us all the favor of telling the truth in the future?

Yet as we pass this anniversary it is important to remember that a quarter century of mendacity has not "settled" the abortion controversy, as the *New York Times* triumphantly claimed on Jan. 23, 1973. Millions of Americans have declined the court's instruction to regard acceptance of *Roe* as a litmus test of fidelity to the rule of law. More and more doctors refuse to perform abortions. And truth is a powerful political weapon, as the congressional debate over partial-birth abortion demonstrated.

Whether the truth will prevail is unclear. But for so long as it does not, American democracy is in peril of its soul.

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