

All ethics is 'situational'

A reader wrote to ask whether "situation ethics" is acceptable for Catholics. This is the sort of question that moral theologians love to get, since it has a kind of "yes and no" answer.

The answer is NO, if by situation ethics we mean something like this: "In the unique and complex situations that we all face in life, just do whatever seems right at the time. Base your action simply on what seems okay at the time. Don't worry that your response may be rooted only in your own fears and aspirations, without regard for sound reason or the common good. All situations are unique, and all we have to think about is what the situation dictates. We should just try to do the loving thing and be done with it!"

That version of "situation ethics" is simply not consistent with the Catholic tradition. Above all else, the Catholic moral tradition is rooted in reason: We have great confidence in the capacity of human beings to think about reality and come to reasoned decisions about the "right act rightly accomplished." Our decisions need always to be based in solid principles while still taking account of real human goods we try to achieve.

But there is another sense in which we must admit that ALL ethics is, in fact, "situation ethics." Every moral question we ask is asked because it has implications for particular situations we face. We



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ask about the right thing to do because we face complex circumstances in life, and these unique situations prompt us to ask about the meaning of both the principles we accept and the human goods we strive to achieve through our actions. Let's take an example.

There has been a strong moral consensus against self-mutilation of our bodies. As Christians we believe that our bodies are "temples of the Holy Spirit" that God dwells in us, that we are made in the image of God. Thus we practice respect for our bodies and are not free to harm or abuse ourselves. The principle of totality says that we must not sever or dispose of "parts" of the body, or cause disruption of the whole physical entity that we are.

In spite of this principle and the very sound values behind it, however,

we are likely to know individuals for whom a medical diagnosis precipitated the surgical removal of one or more diseased organs. At the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, news reports told us of at least one person who had to undergo the amputation of a limb in order to be freed from the ruins of the Federal Building there.

These cases suggest that there may be sound reasons for overriding the principle of totality, or non-mutilation. The reasons justifying such a move are based on the situation at hand. I know a young man whose cancerous leg was amputated. The removal of his limb was directed at saving his life. In this case, saving a life was recognized as so valuable a good that it warranted overriding a principle that would be observed had the situation been different. We are able to judge this a "good" action in spite of its violating a principle — a violation justified on the basis of the situation at hand.

(For those who want to consider a case of amputation — although fictional — that is entirely unjustified, watch the film, "The Beguiled," with Clint Eastwood. There, passion, jealousy and a desire for revenge provoke the removal of a soldier's leg. There, an entirely different situation prevails with an entirely malicious intention.

Two different situations evoke two entirely different moral judgments of a similar act.)

In summary, then, I answer the question about situation ethics with both a Yes and a No. On the one hand, ALL ethics is, in one way or another, situation ethics. This is because all ethical thought seeks to address questions of right and wrong concerning the real, complex situations we face in life. The new catechism points out that we exercise our consciences not only at the level of accepting valid principles and rules, but also at the level of their application to the concrete situations of our lives.

On the other hand, the answer to the question involves a strong NO, too, if by situation ethics we mean responding to complex circumstances "just any old way we want." The entire Catholic moral tradition is based on the assumption that we can use sound reasoning based on the application of reasonable principles to the circumstances of our life. This may seem too ambiguous for some. To me, it is a wonderful testament to the church's confidence in the responsible, reasonable adults we are called to be.

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

Jesus earned disciples' trust

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 5:1-11. (R1) Isaiah 6:1-2, 3-8. (R2) 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.

A man had spent the whole day fishing in vain. In desperation, he went to the local fish market and bought three fat fish.

"Before you wrap them," he said to the clerk, "toss them to me, one by one. That way I'll be able to tell my wife I caught them and I'll be speaking the truth."

Someone said that the only thing that casts doubt on the miracles of Jesus is that they were all witnessed by fishermen!

The Gospel tells us that the disciples had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. They were not fishing for a hobby. This was their livelihood. The names of the towns around the Sea of Galilee reflected fishing's importance. Tarichaea, for example, meant "the place of salt fish." Bethsaida meant "fish town." At least four of Jesus' followers came from there. Most of the townsmen worked in the fish business.

It was a tiring business. After the day's catch, fishermen still had to mend and wash their nets, repair and maintain the boats, preserve the fish, then bargain with the merchants to sell or trade the catch.

In the Gospel, Peter, Andrew, James and John had been fishing all night, be-



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

cause fish come closer to the surface of the water at night. During the day the sun's rays penetrate the surface of the water, driving the fish into deeper depths. The fact that the disciples were washing their nets probably indicated that they were finished for the day and were ready to go home. They were tired and frustrated, for they had toiled all night and had nothing to show for it.

Jesus' request must have seemed strange to them. He asked them to go back out in their boats into the deeper waters and let down their nets again. This didn't make much sense to them, but notice they obeyed. And their obedience was rewarded far beyond their wildest dreams. They caught so many fish that their nets were breaking.

To trust Jesus like that, a carpenter who knew nothing about fishing, took a lot of humility and faith. Simon Peter fell at the knees of Jesus saying, "Leave me, Lord, I am a sinful man." He knew he was in the presence of someone most holy and he knew himself unworthy, so he felt shame and fear. Humility comes from the Latin word "humus" which means "ground." A humble person is someone who has his feet on the ground. He knows who he really and truly is and who God is.

Humility is not a horizontal virtue, seeing myself in relation to my neighbor; it is a vertical virtue, seeing myself in relation to God. So one side of humility is truth, seeing self in relation to God; and the other side is admitting the truth, acknowledging total dependence on God, obeying him as the disciples did Jesus.

Even though the disciples were humble, they did not fully believe in Jesus until they caught all those fish. We're like that sometimes: We don't believe in Jesus until he has done something for us. In the movie "Jerry Maguire," Tom Cruise is an agent for sports stars. Tom tries to snag a football star, Cuba Gooding Jr. Cuba likes Tom, but he won't sign until Tom can guarantee him a hefty contract. His catch phrase is, "Show me the money! Show me

the money!"

Well, in the same way, Peter respected and trusted Jesus. But in his own way, he was saying, "Show me the fish! Show me the fish!" When Jesus did, "they" left everything, and became his followers.

Such is the story of our faith. First, we humbly obey Christ in little things. Then we learn we can trust him. And then, we give him our all.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

- Monday, February 9
1 Kings 8:1-7, 9-13; Mark 6:53-56
- Tuesday, February 10
1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30; Mark 7:1-13
- Wednesday, February 11
1 Kings 10:1-10; Mark 7:14-23
- Thursday, February 12
1 Kings 11:4-13; Mark 7:24-30
- Friday, February 13
1 Kings 11:29-32, 12:19; Mark 7:31-37
- Saturday, February 14
1 Kings 12:26-32, 13:33-34; Mark 8:1-10

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