

Resolve to study pacifism

A good friend wrote to ask me to write a column on Jesus' command to love our enemies. I liked the idea right away, but got bogged down reading about the Scripture passages involved. That column is still in production. In the meantime, the United States came close to waging war on Iraq and several articles and letters appeared in this paper about varying positions on the morality of warfare.

The history of Catholic teaching on the morality of war is fascinating, and well worth investigating. Trying to use the teachings of Jesus to establish policies of nation states seems logical and necessary to some Catholics. According to a growing number of Scripture scholars, a distinguishing mark of the ministry of Jesus was his stance on loving one's enemies. Of the many Jewish sects existing in the first century, the one Jesus founded increasingly appears to have accepted this as a mark of identity.

Considerable evidence indicates that Christians in the church's first centuries did maintain a pacifist stance on war. According to some historians, it was only after the conversion of Constantine and the acceptance of Christianity as the official and established religion of the Roman Empire that Christians began to bear arms on behalf of political entities and goals.

To those who are convinced of the im-



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

morality of war today, these considerations are important enough to carry the day. Fidelity to Jesus' word and the vision of the early church are of primary importance; the responsibilities of political entities like nations and armies are secondary and should not detract from the primary loyalties of Christians.

Christian pacifism did not disappear after the conversion of Constantine. Even if the official position of the church has, for most of our history, endorsed the just war theory as a method for weighing the moral justification for some wars, individuals and groups holding strong pacifist positions have always been present among us as well. Part of the deliberation about the liberty of conscience so prevalent in medieval thought took place precisely because of dissent by some Catholics regarding the church's official

stance on war. While those in authority supported scrutinizing proposed military action according to just war criteria, a small number of individuals asserted that they could not, in conscience, accept this teaching.

Present day Catholicism includes among its members many individuals and groups who embrace a pacifist perspective on war. Pax Christi is one group that came into existence after World War II as a result of some French Catholics seeking reconciliation with the German people. This group has become international, focusing on peace education, the arms trade and disarmament. In the United States, Pax Christi/USA has benefited from involvement by such well-known members as Dorothy Day, Eileen Egan, Gordon Zahn and Bishop Thomas Gumbleton.

In 1983 the bishops of the United States drafted a pastoral letter called "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response." This letter was critical of some aspects of U.S. defense policy and is noteworthy because of its attempt to grant official status to pacifism as a legitimate moral stance of Catholics.

The advent of nuclear weapons and the prospect of nuclear war gave rise not only to this document, but also influenced the emergence of "nuclear pacifism," which maintains that any use of nuclear

weapons would be immoral.

Many intriguing books and articles deal with the history of Catholic teaching on war and peace. *The Catholic Peace Tradition* by Ron Musto presents a lively history of pacifism and its relation to the just war theory. I recommend it to anyone searching for a greater understanding.

Like most of us, I have Catholic friends on "both sides" of this question: Some are pacifists and some, while abhorring war, do not take an absolute stance against every war. They maintain that while war is evil, there may be times when it must be employed to prevent greater evil through unjust aggression.

There is a tendency among Catholics to assume that two positions on this issue ought not to exist at the same time. Surely, one must be "wrong" and one must be "right."

I wonder whether a better form of wisdom for the time being might be for all of us to resolve to learn more about Catholic pacifism and the methods it proposes to resist aggression while avoiding warfare. There is nothing more needed in the world today than the reduction of violence in all its forms.

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

Forgiving may be hardest mission

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:19-31. (R1) Acts 5:12-16. (R3) Revelation 1:9-13, 17-19.

Sunday's Gospel is about one of the greatest sacraments in the church: the sacrament of reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness is central to the living out of our faith. Every day we pray: "Forgive us ... as we forgive." In the Apostles' Creed we proclaim: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

Forgiveness is a rare commodity in our society today. So often the cry is for revenge, retribution. Build bigger prisons. Bring back the death penalty. "Do unto others before they have the chance to do unto you." Forgiveness is central to our living the faith, but it may be the hardest thing Jesus has called on us to do.

Most of us have no trouble with the Ten Commandments. We don't kill or steal. Generally we're not going to commit adultery or bear false witness or bow down to other gods. But to forgive someone who has wronged us — that's tough. It's tough even though we know that seeking revenge is almost always counterproductive.

Forgiveness is a key to a successful life. Winners don't hold grudges. Winners don't hang onto resentment. Winners don't try to exact their pound of flesh. A



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

jokester quipped that an Irishman's Alzheimer's disease is to forget everything but the grudge.

Jesus not only told us to forgive our enemies; he set the example. On the first Easter Sunday eve when his own Apostles needed forgiveness, Jesus forgave them their sins. That's what his first "Peace be with you" meant. Then he instituted the great sacrament of reconciliation. For he went on to say, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The Father had sent him precisely to save people from their sins. That was why Gabriel told Mary and Joseph to call him "Jesus," which means "Savior."

The Pharisees once said, "Who can forgive sins but God?" They were right. So Jesus gave them God. He breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit" — "Re-

ceive God." Then he told them, "If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them." Paul later on exulted in this power given to the priests of Christ. He said, "New things have come ... God has given us the ministry of reconciliation ... and entrusted the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). The Lions Club has no power to forgive sins. Nor does AARP. The power was given only to the Apostles and their successors.

What a gift! Then Isaiah said of God: "Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; though they be crimson red, they may become white as wool" (1:18). There is no unforgivable sin with God.

Yet truly, confession is not so difficult, for it is to one whose lips are sealed, to one whom we call "Father," to one who knows our frame and loves us. What an opportunity! What a blessing! In the confessional the justice of God meets mercy. God demands so little. How foolish not to avail ourselves of this great sacrament at least monthly, as Our Lady requested.

The ostrich is a very tall bird with a round body and a very long neck. When the ostrich gets scared, it doesn't run and hide, as we might do. No, it simply sits right down and stretches its long neck along the ground. Stretched out like that,

it looks like a big mound of dirt.

The Apostles on the first Easter were afraid. They hid behind closed doors. But Jesus found them and banished their fears by forgiveness. As the little ditty goes: "Don't be afraid, little Johnny my boy, / Open the door and go in; / The longer you wait before telling your sins, / The harder it is to begin." Don't be an ostrich.

And remember that the forgiveness God offers all of us we all ought to offer to our neighbor.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, April 20
Acts 4:23-31; John 3:1-8
Tuesday, April 21
Acts 4:32-37; John 3:7-15
Wednesday, April 22
Acts 5:17-26; John 3:16-21
Thursday, April 23
Acts 5:27-33; John 3:31-36
Friday, April 24
Acts 5:34-42; John 6:1-15
Saturday, April 25
1 Peter 5:5-14; Mark 16:15-20



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