

# COLUMNISTS

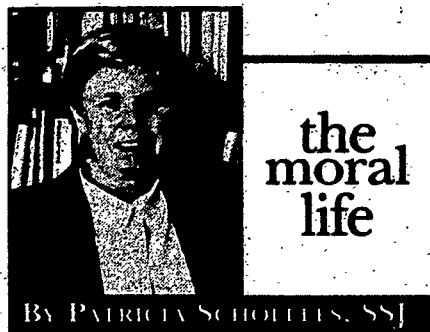
## Trends influence moral theology

Sometimes I lose a sense of perspective, and I can do that even about my own field, moral theology. It might be interesting here to stand back and reflect on some of the major trends that have dominated moral theology over the past few decades.

Many readers of this column are as old as I am. For us "older Catholics" moral theology wasn't much on our minds as we matured. During most of my schooling moral theology was a topic for seminars only: Seminarians needed to study moral theology so they could become confessors. There were, by and large, few adult "lifelong faith formation" sessions.

In addition to seminary students, those studying in Catholic colleges often had a chance to dip into the dominant themes of moral theology as it had been presented during the first part of the century. Basically, the moral theology of that era focused on the morality of specific acts.

Students were taught about moral norms. They learned about choices people could make, and especially focused primarily on the negative choices — acts that constituted "sin." A considerable



BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

amount of attention was given to the relative seriousness, or "gravity" of particular kinds of choices and the acts that resulted from them. Thus I can remember understanding that stealing was a venial sin unless the thief stole "a lot," in which case the act became a mortal sin.

This version of moral theology had much to commend it. It was clear, absolute and could be readily explained to people in a crisp, clear way without expecting much discussion or debate. The subject was acts; the question was "How bad is it to do 'X'?"

The trouble is that this method

seemed to need further development. Pastors and theologians began to meet Catholics who were asking a different set of questions about the moral life. They wondered about how their faith in and love for God enters into the choices they make. They inquired about how their intentions and motives enter into the morality of their choices and actions.

People were increasingly looking for a way to see their faith as a motivation for doing more. They were more concerned about how their emotional lives entered into their choices, and indicated that we needed to consider the emotional dimension of our choices as well as the physical structure of the acts we perform. They seemed to be more inquisitive about the relational character of sin and virtue: How do my attitudes and habits affect the relationships and communities I'm committed to? How can I become a better spouse? parent? parishioner? citizen?

Social movements also began to influence the way people thought about their moral lives. A growing feminist consciousness, new questions about the role

of church authority in the conscientious decisions Catholics make, a sense that we ought to take more moral insight from our own human experience all led to a need to "renew" moral theology.

This renewal of moral theology is still underway. While we've lost something of the clarity we enjoyed before, we've gained in an appreciation of the ways our interior, subjective lives affect our moral lives. We have increased opportunities for adult education, and can come to a deeper awareness of how the actual questions in our hearts need to influence teachings our church offers.

Catholics today won't be satisfied with negative assessments about actions. We want to know more about the relational and personal, emotional aspects of our choices. For moral theology to be done rightly today, theologians, and the church's magisterium itself, need to attend to the actual questions that emerge from the real lives of faithful Catholic people.

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

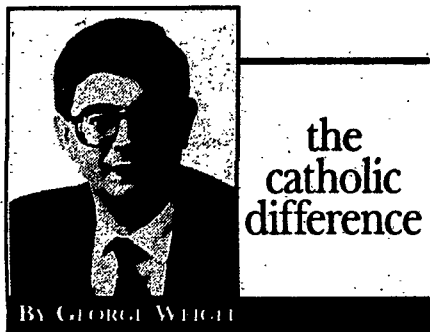
## The church's truth defies labels

An American prelate once said to me that the "greatest curse" of Catholic life since the Second Vatican Council was the epidemic use of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" to categorize, demonize or canonize everybody and everything. He thought the taxonomy impeded our living the reality of the church as a communion of those called to holiness, as the council had taught in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.

Judging from his address to the bishops of Pennsylvania and New Jersey on March 12, Pope John Paul II agrees.

During this year's ad limina visits to Rome, the pontiff is reflecting with the bishops of the United States on Vatican II, choosing a different council text as the focus of his remarks to each regional group of bishops. March 12, the text was *Lumen Gentium* and its teaching that the church is "the community in which we meet the living God and his merciful love."

The church exists, the pope said, to tell the world that, "in the fullness of time (God) sent his Son, born of a woman, for



BY GEORGE WEIGEL

the salvation of the world." The incarnation of Christ and the redemption of the world took place in history. That means that "the history of salvation has entered the history of the world." The story of salvation is the world's story, rightly understood. The mission of the church is to tell the world the truth about itself through a dialogue of salvation. The church exists to tell the world: You are greater than you can possibly imagine.

That's what the church is for. And because the church is "the kingdom of God now present in mystery" (*Lumen Gentium*

3), the church is not one religious organization in a supermarket of religious "options." The church has a "unique importance for the human family," for the church is where humanity learns the truth about its origin, dignity and destiny. The church is where we experience a foretaste of that destiny, which will be eternal life within the light and love of the Trinity.

That is why the church is a "communion" of believers with the living God, with each other and with the "communion of saints" who have preceded us. Thus the church encompasses far more than the community of Christians we see around us. The church "embraces those who now see God as he is and those who have died and are being purified."

If the church really is a "mystery" of love and communion, the pope continued, and if telling the world the truth about the human story is what the church is for, then "her reality can never be fully captured by sociological or political categories or analyses."

Like "liberal" and "conservative."

During the February consistory at which the archbishop of Chicago, Francis George, was made a cardinal, I did an interview in St. Peter's Square with a reporter who kept trying to draw me into a "liberal/conservative" comparison between Cardinal George and his predecessor, the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

I finally said, "Look at that obelisk behind me. That's probably the last thing the apostle Peter, a witness to the Resurrection, ever saw on this earth. He's buried 500 yards beyond there. Looking at that and thinking about that, the question isn't whether any of this is 'liberal' or 'conservative.' The only question is whether it's true."

That, I think, is what the pope was urging all of us to believe more deeply and preach more vigorously as the Great Jubilee approaches — the truth of the Gospel, which is the truth about both God and us.

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