

Don't fret about church's pendulum swings

Recent articles in the press about actions of the pope regarding the church's teaching authority invite us all to reflect on the theme of "teaching with authority." According to two reports last week, the pope has acted to reemphasize limitations on the teaching authority of theologians and bishops' conferences. His actions do not "add" anything to existing positions on these matters, but they reinforce what we already know about the tone of this papacy in recent years: Vatican officials are moving toward increasing centralization of church authority. This direction is obviously a reaction on Rome's part to what they perceive to be too great an emphasis on the more traditional theology that emphasizes the church's teaching authority residing with local bishops on behalf of diocesan churches.

The fact that there is some "pendulum swinging" on this question should not be surprising to us. The entire history of the church has been a continual series of power struggles between the several levels and kinds of authority exercised across church ranks. Even if we go all the way back to the New Testament itself we find recognition of different kinds of authority recognized by the church.

As we all struggle with the ways in which our own conduct and moral lives are affected by the moral teachings of



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

the church, it is informative to reflect on a few of the major understandings of "teaching with authority" that are present in the New Testament. We learn a few things right away; the fact that there are different theologies of teaching authority is itself a new realization for many.

On the one hand, the entire history of teaching authority has been influenced by the final image in Matthew's Gospel. Here the risen Christ explains to the apostles that "all authority in heaven and earth" has been given to him, and he commissions them to "make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

Of the four Gospels, we know that Matthew's is the one most interested in the church as a visible, structured organization. Matthew, more than Mark, Luke or John, is addressing problems like marriage legislation and Sabbath obser-

vance. These were apparently the hot issues regarding teaching and authority in his church at that time. Matthew's concern was about the church as institution, and how it should exercise juridical authority. For him, it was the church structures, conditions of membership, the nature of the church, that were most important. When he concluded his Gospel with the image of Jesus passing on teaching authority, he was promoting this view of institutional teaching authority.

But Scripture scholars are quick to tell us that Matthew's is not the only theology of the church in the New Testament, nor is his the only theology of moral teaching. As is usually the case, there is another equally valid, and complementary, theology of moral behavior and moral teaching to be found in the New Testament.

This other view is present particularly in the writings of John and Paul. It emphasizes morality and the moral life as the practical living out of the individual Christian's faith. In this view, moral guidance is considered more a part of the church's sanctifying power rather than its teaching power. For John and Paul, Christ and his Spirit are the "internal Teacher" of Christians striving to live their faith.

Passages like 1 John 2:27 support this other view of morality, teaching and the

"internal authority" of God's grace. The passage reads: "But the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie."

This notion of "internal teaching" and the authority of those anointed in the Holy Spirit (meaning all of us initiated into the church) was not emphasized in my own education as a Catholic. I learned a great deal about the kind of teaching authority that Matthew's Gospel assumes, and that is so dominant in all our thinking about the church's structures and institutions. But I learned practically nothing about the kind of teaching illustrated in the passage from 1 John and emphasized by John and Paul.

The fact that the pendulum swings should not unduly upset us, whether we're convinced that that is a good or a bad thing. The fact that we each receive instruction within us from the Spirit who "teaches with authority" should inspire us to spend some effort grappling with what we know about our moral lives from within — perhaps as a substitute for becoming unduly upset about the exercise of authority "from without."

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

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Sr. M. Lucy
Native of: San Francisco, California
Prior Experience: Medical Technologist

When I was in my mid-thirties, I felt myself drawn to God. One evening I had occasion to read closely the 25th Responsorial Psalm... "One thing I ask is to dwell in the house of the Lord forever... behold His beauty!" The words bit me profoundly. It was as if they expressed my deepest heart's desire.

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