

COLUMNISTS

View of sin makes a difference in how you repent

The last few weeks have been pretty gruesome in terms of actions undertaken in the name of "conviction." We've witnessed the hateful slaughter of a young man in Wyoming, allegedly killed because he was a gay person. Then we saw his heartbroken family trying to pray at his funeral, only to have protesters outside the church carry large signs denouncing homosexuality. I suppose some of the attitudes that contributed to the many facets of that scene began with ordinary people simply trying to be strong about their convictions and act with integrity.

Somewhere, however, strong convictions and acting from integrity went terribly awry, and a person's life was brutally taken from him. His family's sorrow was increased, his community's funeral ritual interrupted and tainted.

Closer to home we witnessed the murder of a doctor, apparently because he performed abortions. Again, strong convictions, fed by a notion of "integrity" undoubtedly influenced by American individualism, went awry. A man (also convinced that he was acting from good convictions) was executed while at home in his own kitchen.

As religious people we cannot help but wonder in what way these kinds of deviant actions are fed by attitudes that are



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLIS, SSJ

based in religion. We are left wondering whether religion actually contributes to the tendency by some unstable individuals to act in hateful, violent ways because they need so desperately to be "unbending" in their conviction. We see this same pattern based in other "good" systems, like patriotism or institutional and peer loyalty.

We are left trying to analyze this phenomenon of how individualism, our American culture, our history of following a "radical" Jesus, our need to act on our values, all influence the meaning and place we give to personal integrity and our strongest beliefs. I'd like to suggest at least two influences from Christian tradition that can provide some help as we struggle against this kind of misuse of our strong convictions.

First, we have a well-developed and su-

perly balanced teaching about individual and communal repentance. Every eucharistic liturgy begins by inviting us to recall our sins and reaffirm our intention to avoid evil. The action and attitude of repentance is part of the core dynamic of genuine Christian spirituality. At its core, the virtue of repentance is rooted in reverence for God and the continual experience of conversion to God. As Christians we acknowledge the harm done by sin — our own — and we strive to undo the harm done by sin. We express genuine sorrow for our own sinfulness and struggle against evil in the future. This is not a one-time event for Christians, but the ever-present dynamic at the heart of the Christian life.

More attention to the attitude and action of repentance could, I think, help to counter the sort of arrogance that can emerge from holding strong convictions. Genuine repentance quite naturally engenders attitudes of reverence, humility, and compassion for others. Violence is rooted in hatred that begins as an arrogance that sets us above and apart from our "adversaries." Individual and communal repentance experienced and expressed in the midst of community, especially our worshipping community, can become a real source of salvation from the trap that religiously-based convic-

tions can become.

Another source of wisdom offered from our tradition comes to us from Eastern Christianity. In conceiving and understanding the reality of sin and grace, churches in the east have historically found a medical model to be most helpful. This means that their understanding of sin, whether one's own or that of others, is akin to the process of disease and healing. Being converted from sin and sinfulness is like being in the grip of a sickness. What one needs is to recover, and to do that we have to avail ourselves of the processes that lead to healing.

In the West, we are more likely to understand sin according to a 'juridical' model. Sinners are envisioned not as patients, but as criminals and law-breakers. Our process of conversion from sin is less a process of healing, as it is one that parallels the legal system: accusation, judgment, punishment. This model seems less helpful in helping us turn away from sin, and it inadvertently feeds the arrogance that lets strong convictions become hateful and violent. A sense of genuine repentance and moving to a 'medical model' understanding of sin and sinfulness can help us all resist this tendency.

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Whatever happened to a 'good death'?

As All Souls Day approached, I began thinking about the death this past summer of Jacek Kalabinski, one of the journalistic heroes of Poland's Solidarity movement. In recent years, he had been a member of my parish while working as Washington correspondent for several Polish newspapers. As he would have wanted it, Mr. Kalabinski died in harness. Perhaps because of that, his memorial Mass at our church started me wondering why the custom of praying for a "good death" has dropped out of Catholic piety.

A "good death," according to the traditional formula, is one in which we are granted the grace of "final perseverance" in order to die in the "state of grace." Nothing wrong with that, of course. But perhaps the traditional concepts can be stretched a little.

For human beings, life has an inherently dramatic structure. And the great drama of life is lived in the gap between the self I am and the self I ought to be. According to the Gospel, we close that gap by growing, under grace, in the capacity to dispose of ourselves freely in self-giving love. There is a "law of the gift" built into the human condition; we



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BY GEORGE WEIGEL

can know it by reason and philosophical analysis.

But for Christians, the "law of the gift" is most powerfully confirmed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The incarnation of the Son of God was itself an act of self-giving self-abnegation; the life of Christ found its completion in history in the self-giving self-sacrifice of the Son to the Father on the cross. The Father's answer to that complete self-abandonment — the resurrection — is the warrant that life according to the "law of the gift" is life lived toward an eternity of happiness in the fellowship of the Holy Trinity.

Death is always dramatic. But in the perspective of the "law of the gift," the

drama of death is intensified. For death is the only moment in life when we can make a completely irrevocable and total offering of ourselves to God. Martyrdom is, as always, the paradigm of the Christian life. The martyrs live the "law of the gift" to the full, and before the eyes of the world. That is why martyrdom is a powerful form of evangelization.

But even short of martyrdom, what we traditionally called "final perseverance" should not be understood simply as a last holding-on to the truths of faith. That it is. But it is a holding-on in service to a final letting-go, as we offer ourselves, our personal history, and our eternal destiny to the mercy of God.

No one can — or, perhaps, in the age of Jack Kevoorkian, we must say no one should — determine the moment of one's own death. Death can happen at any time. Preparing for a Christian death, therefore, means a steady prayer of self-offering now, and a regular giving of oneself in service to others now. It also means praying for the gift of the kind of death that allows us to make one final, complete, and conscious offering of ourselves to the Father, thereby uniting ourselves fully and irrevocably to Christ

on the cross.

A "good death," then, is the culmination of a life lived according to the "law of the gift." In this perspective, death, rather than being an absurdity, is an opportunity to live that "law of the gift" in the most radically self-disposing way possible. Death then becomes a part of life in something other than merely physical terms; death is the dramatic moment in the drama of the spiritual life. For death-as-self-abandonment is the passage to a form of living defined by the most complete mutual self-entrustment — life within the light and love of the Godhead.

St. Joseph, the traditional patron of a "good death," now comes into clearer focus: Joseph abandoned his own plans in order to answer, in his own unique way, the call to fruitful virginity to which his betrothed, Mary, had already said "Yes." To pray to St. Joseph for a "good death," then, is to pray that we may be as pure in our self-giving as Mary's husband was.

May the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace.

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