

COLUMNISTS

Life issues surround us

Reflecting on the "life issues" is always fruitful for Christians. We are reminded often by countless authorities that we live in the midst of a "culture of death" and that human life is devalued and threatened in myriad ways. This sort of reflection often leads me to a kind of prideful response in which I simply recount for myself the many ways in which I am not as bad as others on this score. After all, I oppose abortion. I oppose the death penalty. I oppose euthanasia and assisted suicide. I support all kinds of organizations that champion my views on these matters.

What I am less likely to do is move beyond my customary way of looking at these issues so that I challenge myself to see the sides of each question that so often remain overlooked. For example, I rarely push myself to take these questions out of narrow little boxes in order to connect them with their social, cultural, political and economic contexts. Instead, I remain with the mostly stagnant mainstream of moral theology, still identifying moral analysis with the narrow category of investigating individual actions, unconnected from their fuller contexts — which leaves them separated from their real circumstances and thus their



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

true moral meaning.

For example, because it can seem "religiously correct" in many church settings simply to denounce abortion as publicly and as loudly as I can, I often neglect even mentioning related issues. Thus, I rarely talk about a host of issues that have enormous implications for the freedom and justice of women and children, and that can directly influence the decisions pregnant women and couples actually make. Only rarely do I mention the availability of day care, employment with equal pay for comparable work, adequate health care and prenatal care, the lack of parenting classes and other educational opportunities for future fathers. But these are all part of the "abortion issue."

Too often I succumb to the temptation

displayed in various media, which luxuriate in the indignation that surrounds sinful acts of individuals. This is particularly true when the sins in question have to do with sex and sexuality. This focus on sexual impropriety allows us to keep our "moral" juices flowing, without letting us attend to the broader social attitudes and cultural arrangements that undermine our respect for life. Last year our entire country spent months of major media and "constitutional" attention on one individual's pattern of sexual indiscretion, while we had to hunt down alternative publications to find any extended treatment of racism, the oppression of women, the exploitation of our natural resources, or our often idolatrous reliance on and service of wealth. We neglect these life issues because of our narrow focus on individual actions and our reluctance to acknowledge the real power of social sin.

I confess my own laziness in pushing to a deeper appreciation of the sociopolitical analysis of morality that needs to be done. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World alerted us to the dangers of this tendency 35 years ago: "Profound and rapid changes make it particularly urgent that no one,

ignoring the trend of events or drugged by laziness, content himself [or herself] with a merely individualistic morality. It grows increasingly true that the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good, according to his [or her] own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions, dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life." (30)


So often the "life issues" that we focus on refer us to those who are pushed to the bottom of the social and economic ladder. They are victims of the social systems, economic practices and political policies that allow the rest of us to ignore their real plight and find "respectable" ways to condemn individual acts while disregarding the real causes at the very heart of the matter.

The task for moral theology over the next 50 years should be, I think, to help us become as consistent about the social, political and economic factors associated with the life issues as we have been about the personal actions that dominate our thinking on these matters.

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