

COLUMNISTS

Putting Scripture into modern context

The use of Scripture in moral theology is tricky. It's hard not to take particular phrases and sentences and apply them literally and directly to today's situations. Scripture scholars help us enormously by reminding us that biblical interpretation is a learned skill, and that we must exercise caution and training as we seek what meaning passages written thousands of years ago can have for us today.

In the story of the rich man (Luke 18), for example, Luke includes Jesus' saying: "Go, sell what you have, give to the poor, and come follow me." If we assume that that sentence offers a general rule for all Christians, most of us will have to resign our church memberships immediately. I know very few people who have sold everything they have, at least up through this morning.

What we do with passages like that, I suppose, is to try to adapt them to our own situation. Because we live in a basically capitalistic economy that requires us to own things in order to stay off welfare, to avoid homelessness, to prosper and even to stay alive, we may do some mental work on that passage that proceeds something like this: "Jesus was very generous and put the needs of others ahead of his own. He did kind and wonderful things for people in need. So should I. Since I have to pay the mortgage, put the kids through college, eke out a little social life for myself and my spouse, remain a respectable member of society, I surely can't give away everything I have. But I can become involved in some cause that



the
moral
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

assists the needy. I can apply some of my economic resources to helping to make the lives of others better. Maybe I can apply some of my other resources to that cause as well, volunteering some time or offering to use some of my skills to help others."

Much of our interaction with particular Scripture passages takes that shape. Sometimes our deliberations of this sort are solitary, sometimes we work out our response with someone else, such as a spouse or close associate. We engage in this kind of interpretation almost as often as we hear or read the Scriptures, since most of the stories and passages there require some kind of adaptation simply because each comes to us from a different culture and a different age.

Conducting this sort of activity as we try to figure out what the Christian message means for "me" is fairly typical, I think. Doing this same thing as communities is less familiar to us, but could have enormous value in helping us understand what it means to be a church and to experience the meaning and power that

church teachings actually can have for us.

I think, for example, of the letter from the U.S. Bishops drafted in November 1986, titled "Economic Justice for All." That letter was unique in that the bishops received all sorts of testimony from all sorts of people as they moved toward a final draft of that letter. Recognizing their need to hear from economic experts, social ethicists and others, an entire network of hearings was established as that document moved toward its final draft. It offers many important principles for an area of our life that is singularly important and affects all of us every day.

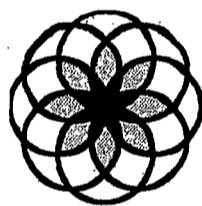
The problem with that document is that it has had little impact on very many of us. I think that drafting documents like this one would benefit from a different kind of process, more like the exercise described above, which we engage in all the time. I wonder, for example, what would happen for a future document if every Catholic household — every family, rectory, convent, individual — was requested to reflect on two Scripture passages over the course of several months and to make adjustments to their own spending patterns and use of economic resources in the light of their reflection. I'd follow the lead of a colleague and suggest the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19), in which Zacchaeus, after dining with Jesus, is moved to give away not "all" that he owns, but a percentage of what he owns. Aspects of that story might parallel what many of us think is more possible for us. The second story might be that of the Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16), in which the "haves"

are contrasted with the extreme "have nots." Even those of us who feel enormous economic pressure in this country are still many times more well off than most of those living elsewhere in the world.

After a period of reflection and possible readjustment in our approaches to our own wealth, sessions could then be established for "collecting" our individual experiences and learning from them. From that exercise, a document might be drafted that reflects what we actually have done together as a church. Along with the principles of Catholic social teaching and the advice of experts, such a document would flow from our common reflection on Scripture and our actual experience. It would be from this foundation that such a document might invite the wider society to see what we've done, and perhaps to do likewise.

I think an exercise like this as part of drafting church documents would be truer to our identity as a church, would make the resulting document more important and ultimately more useful to us, would allow us to use our imaginations and experience in ways that would let even the social teachings of the church come alive for us. It would also help us to appreciate the fact that church teachings don't come "ready made from the mouth of God," but actually result from reflection on the sources of faith in the light of our experience.

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



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Kids' Answers:

from page 8

1. Matthew
2. Luke
3. Acts
4. Romans
5. 1 Corinthians
6. Timothy
7. Hebrews
8. James
9. Jude
10. Revelation