

COLUMNISTS

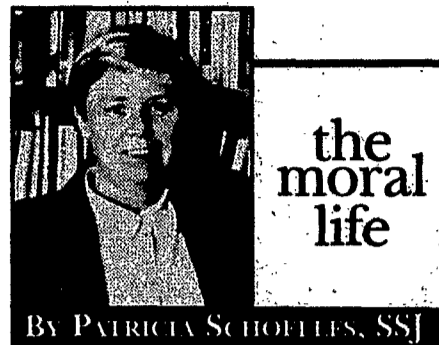
To become good, do good things

One of the best statements about the moral life that I've ever heard is this one by Aristotle: "If you want to be good and know the good, watch what the good person does, do likewise, and gradually you will become good."

Part of what I like about it is that it roots the moral life in the concrete people and communities around us rather than in abstract principles or ideas. It seems to me that it is true to my experience as well. The moral notions that develop in people begin and are made real not because of rules or principles they know, but because their consciousness is changed through the example they see in others — both good and bad.

Just considering Aristotle's quote alerts us to his conviction that moral goodness is neither abstract nor instant. His three-part formula gives us a kind of "moral plan" if we want to become better people than we are now. First, we have to be exposed to good people and their actions, either in real life or through the stories we hear. I know that Aristotle lived in a Greek city state many years before Christ. Thus, he could not have anticipated the current parish structure of our church. Still, his statement can highlight one of the best ways to view church participation. Our parish community can be understood, I suppose, as a kind of "school of virtue" in that it exposes us to a group of people dedicated to Christ, trying to live the Christian life. Surely we can all think of a few parishioners who display behavior worthy of imitation.

The second part of Aristotle's instruc-



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tion is that we "do likewise." He seems to be telling us that becoming good is a matter of doing good. Just perform good actions. Do what you see other good people doing. Avoid the bad actions you observe in others. Decide what you want to become and shape your actions accordingly. If you want to become an honest person, tell the truth. If you want to be a promise keeper, keep your promises. If you want to become trustworthy, arrange your life so others can trust you to do what you say you will. It's very concrete, quite practical, doesn't demand a decade of graduate education, is available to anybody. If you want to become good and know the good, do good things.

The final phrase is most important of all. Aristotle states that becoming good is not instantaneous, and it isn't a matter only of doing good things. He tells us that gradually we will become good. Just doing the external actions doesn't automatically make us good people. This part of the sentence indicates that the process of growing in goodness implies a change in the self. This change involves more than simply changing our outward be-

havior.

In fact, Aristotle indicates that moral goodness requires a process of self-formation. In his terms, this process is rooted within the communities we belong to, both good and bad, and to some extent depends on them. It also involves concrete decisions and actions that move us in the direction of what it is that we want to become. And it involves time, since change of self happens only gradually.

Aristotle is describing the process of developing habits and virtues in ourselves. He sees human beings as primarily involved in the task of becoming a certain kind of person. He sees the human enterprise as a process of formation by which we gradually develop the habits that help us to see the world rightly first. Seeing rightly enables acting rightly. A habit is a developed skill of seeing and acting. It involves a change of vision, a change in what we want, a change in our affections, a change in our desires.

For Aristotle, moral goodness is never a matter of knowledge. It isn't even primarily a matter of decisions or actions. For him, moral goodness is about people: concrete, real people who confront real situations and see them as a good person would. Moral goodness is formed in us as we gradually come to want the good, not as we come to know things about values or principles. The process of self-formation in this scheme is more a matter of training than it is of education as it is understood today. Moral goodness requires that our wants change, not that our knowledge increases.

An article in yesterday's *New York*

Times (Oct. 15, p. 18A) is what started me thinking about all this. The article describes a law clerk in New Hampshire who faced a wrenching decision about whether to expose a scandal among the justices of the New Hampshire Supreme Court. In recounting his decision to take the action he did, Howard Zibel "found himself thinking about a talk he had heard recently about how the court clerks in Vichy, France, had signed the papers for the deportation of Jewish children. Court clerks, he knew, must be the guardians of due process, helping to defend the rule of law."

In this case, Mr. Zibel's very heroic personal decision resulted in part from the example — in this case the bad example — of others. He saw concretely the effects that resulted from actions by individuals in a position similar to his own. From that concrete image, he found a pattern for his own response to evil. In addition to Zibel's relying on a concrete case to help him know what had to be done, it is clear that he "saw" the situation that had come to exist in his court in a way that others in the office did not. In Aristotle's terms, Zibel had "become good" through the examples of others and because he had learned to "see the world" in a certain way. His decision illustrates Aristotle's conviction that moral goodness is about people, not rules, laws, principles, or even actions. It involves developing the habits that let us both see and act rightly.

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

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