

COLUMNISTS

Even in disagreement, we have unity in faith

I gave a presentation last week on the famous "consistent life ethic." These events are always interesting since lots of people come in order to make their own position on the issue known to the others present. Sometimes I think there is no need for a speaker on this topic at all, because it is so often the case that many of those in attendance are already convinced of the single right perspective on the matter, and the single right way to pursue that end. Last week's event was no exception.

On the one side, there were a number of people firmly committed to the pacifist, anti-war position. During the "open-mike" period, some from this persuasion spoke knowledgeably, offering statistics and insights about American atrocities committed against other nations. One woman quietly and firmly stated that she thought Catholic teaching itself failed as a "consistent life ethic" since it has not roundly declared waging war by nations to be immoral.

On the other side, some spoke to the fact that abortion is clearly and singularly wrong, and it has been declared so by the church. For these people, linking abortion with other issues that appear more ambiguous serves to "water down" the case against it. Rhetoric used by this "side" tried to highlight the evil of abortion and the urgency surrounding this issue by minimizing the evil associated with some of the other issues. Some people supported the uniqueness of the anti-abortion position by emphasizing that it is innocent life that is protected here,



the
moral
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

while capital punishment and warfare allow the taking of life of those who are "guilty." In their opinion this is a crucial moral difference.

At the end of the evening I was left with several impressions. One was a sense of renewed respect for those whose work gave rise to the consistent life ethic. Among these are the authors of the document "The Church in the Modern World" from the Second Vatican Council. Another is the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. The very idea of this ethic emerged from a pastoral sense among church leaders that we all need to move beyond our own sometimes narrow vision of how best to understand and address these issues. We also need to move to a position from which we can respect those whose perspectives differ from our own.

Another impression was the sense that even if we agree on the issues themselves, we often disagree about which tactics and strategies ought to be used in solving the problem. Being "against abortion," for example, doesn't mean that we will immediately agree on which strategy will

work best in stopping the evil. Some favor public demonstrations, others legislative reform, others offer financial support for educational efforts on this topic. Still others work with organizations like Birthright or other centers that help pregnant women.

There is a sense of dissatisfaction with the tactics adopted by others in the struggle against abortion, even among those who most strongly oppose it. In the same way, among those who understand warfare to be the single greatest moral threat on this planet, there is strong disagreement about what style one should adopt in speaking about that issue, about how the church should teach about that issue, about how those who preach from our pulpits should do that.

As I drove home from last week's session, I tried to think about the positives and the negatives of the evening. On the positive side, I think my own attempt to frame the origins of the consistent life ethic and to name the reasons for it were on target. I showed a short video film featuring individual choices that had resulted in saving a human life during the Holocaust. It offered a little inspiration, I think, and offered some insight for further discussion. During the question and comment period, several different positions were expressed. Participants seemed to receive the comments respectfully and thoughtfully. In many ways the event allowed for valid learning—mostly, I think, from the comments made by one another. It was in this session that the purpose and meaning of

the consistent life ethic were most evident.

On the negative side, I think people went home frustrated, perhaps, that their own position was not embraced by all those present. I think there was even a degree of anger just below the surface because of differences that existed among ourselves and because the official church teaching has not responded to individual interpretations of the Gospel.

Being a church that claims to be "universal" is no easy matter. I realize that more and more each day. Skills of tolerance, sharing of power (even when it seems the others are "wrong"), humility enough to recognize that mine is only one perspective in a far wider field, are all attitudes and behaviors that take on increased significance as we struggle to be catholic. Lately I've been reflecting often on the truth of an adage I heard years ago: "Those who disagree with me are not my enemies."

Last week's event brought together people who expressed disagreement with each other's positions and strategies, with aspects of the church's official teachings, with the very topic being discussed, and even (alas) with the main speaker! The atmosphere of belonging to one another in faith prevailed, however, and made me grateful for the fact that, over the past few years, we do seem to have grown quite a bit as a diocesan church reflecting on moral matters.

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

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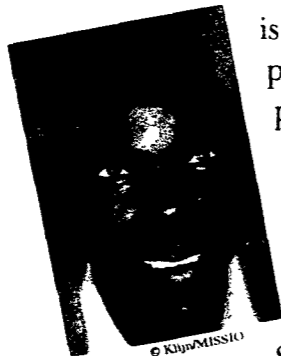
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Sunday, 26 November 2000

Masses

Saturday, Nov. 25 at 5:15 PM &
Sunday, Nov. 26 at 8:00 AM, 9:30 AM,
& Festive Eucharist at 11:30 AM

(Cum Jubilo Mass by Durufle)

Fr. John Colacino, C.P.P.S., homilist

Vespers & Solemn Benediction

Sunday, Nov. 26, at 5:00 PM

(Magnificat by Vaughan-Williams, O Salutaris by Saint-Saëns)

Fr. Frank E. Lioi, homilist

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament

from Saturday, Nov. 25 at 6:00 PM to

Sunday, Nov. 26 at 6:00 PM

(except during the Celebration of Mass)

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