

# COLUMNISTS

## Church changes hardly come 'out of the blue'

I'm speculating today about the way change interacts with law. I'm pretty certain that there are different levels of legislation in every organization, including the church. Some matters require legislation and written laws, others become common practice without being written down. Some laws govern very significant and central matters in an organization, while others determine less significant ones.

That goes for the church, too. There seems always to be a need to distinguish between issues that are central to the faith and order of the church, and those that refer to less significant common practices. In addition, there is always a need to allow for necessary adaptation in particular situations.

Wise governance also calls for wisdom about not legislating too much, so that the genuine life of the group is not smothered and stultified. It also calls for insight about how to implement the laws that are actually "on the books." I once heard an adage stating that all rules need interpretation and implementation, and that the goal is to draw around each one a fence that is neither too narrow nor too wide. In order for healthy and life-giving changes to unfold, it is important that we don't become too narrow in our interpretation of our rules and practices. Effective church governance learns to construct neither too narrow a fence nor too wide a one around our rules and standards.

In reflecting against this background, I am aware that there are a number of



BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

the  
moral  
life

ways in which change occurs in the church's teaching and practice. I can recall two examples from my own experience. The change in language from Latin to English in the liturgy was the result of the action of an ecumenical council. These councils have played a role in many of the great changes and declarations that have governed church belief and practice throughout the centuries. As I experienced it, the change from Latin to English seemed to come from "out of the blue" as an edict right from "the central office."

As I imagine it now, however, I'm certain that lots of people had been thinking about changing the language from Latin into the languages actually spoken by Catholic people for some time before the council ever occurred. There must have been some groups agitating for this change and there were undoubtedly other groups resisting this change whenever they heard it mentioned or suggested. I'll bet there were both good and bad reasons on both sides. Eventually, the council decided to change the practice. I now

take English for granted and I like it that way.

A second change during my lifetime seemed to follow a different course altogether — the practice of inviting girls as well as boys to become altar servers. As I saw it, some pastors in the diocese in which I then lived were allowing girls to serve as altar servers in spite of the fact that the dictates of the church allowed only boys to perform this service. When I talked to some pastors who allowed this practice, they offered a variety of reasons. One told me that he was using his authority as a pastor and making an exception to the rule based on the fact that he thought it was important in our culture to offer girls the same opportunity as boys to be close to the altar and to nurture their faith by serving in this capacity.

He told me that in his view altar service was a function assisting the presider and the community at the liturgy, somewhat akin to greeting, ushering, distributing Communion, lecturing or singing in the choir. He explained that at one time canon law excluded women from singing in church choirs, and he thought the prohibition from altar service was akin to that outdated practice. He justified his exception to prescribed practice on the basis of its being a relatively minor matter in the scheme of church belief and order, and he thought it would achieve more good in his particular parish than upholding the letter of the law in this case.

I recall thinking at the time that the pastor exhibited considerable thought-

fulness and care for both his parishioners and his responsibility as an official of the church. He did not flagrantly disregard a rule because of arrogance or irresponsibility. He was not altering a matter of credal stature to suit his own purposes or to satisfy his own vision of how things should be. He was, I think, adjusting a somewhat minor regulation about church practice for reasons he thought would foster greater faith among those he served. I remember feeling gratitude at the time that this faithful man had been given some "room" to exercise pastoral authority on this matter. Eventually, Pope John Paul II ratified a change in the practice of restricting altar server roles to boys. It became legal to allow girls to be altar servers.

Change comes about in many different ways. Practices in the church do evolve, and they take different routes in doing so. It seems reasonable to presume that changes that come to be proclaimed "officially" by the church are actually the result of much conversation and some conflict before they become official. Sometimes a change in practice actually precedes the official recognition of it at "the central office." Obviously, wisdom requires that we move cautiously and that we care for the unity and order that are necessary for church life. Knowing how to exercise appropriate flexibility in our implementation of the rules of the church is essential for genuine life and growth.

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

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### Corrections

The last name of Frank Lembo, a volunteer at St. Ann's Home, was misspelled in a caption in the Dec. 14 *Catholic Courier*.

A story on Page 10 incorrectly identified Mary Ethel Smith as a former parish secretary for St. Jerome's Church. Smith was a secretary, but was never employed by the parish.

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