

COLUMNISTS

Moral decisions involve more than good vs. evil

I've been involved lately in a series of conversations about how we make moral decisions. It seems that a common interpretation of this process holds that moral decision making involves a choice between good and evil. In reality, however, it seems that very often moral decision making involves a choice between two or more competing goods, or two or more "evils."

In medical cases, we know that patients at the end stages of terminal illness frequently face decisions about various courses of treatment. Sometimes proposed treatments come at considerable "cost" to the patient. This cost is not only financial. It can also be a cost paid in terms of pain or sickness, incapacity, or even grave inconvenience, as when considerable travel is required for a particular medical procedure. In cases like this, patients choose not between good and evil, but between competing goods. They may select a treatment that causes less suffering or incompetence to them, even knowing that their life may actually be shortened as a result.

For a long time, Catholic moral teaching promoted a distinction between "ordinary and extraordinary means." We used to apply these labels to individual treatments. If a proposed treatment were excessively demanding or statistically able to provide only minimally helpful results, that procedure would be termed "extraordinary" and could be refused. Catholic moral teaching never required



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

patients to accept every treatment available in order to keep themselves alive at all costs and beyond all reason.

Patients faced with this sort of decision were choosing between competing goods: less suffering rather than extension of life. From their perspective, the proposed treatment would only prolong their dying, not their living. Their choice was to take a path that would mean, perhaps, less suffering, rather than extra days alive in unacceptable misery. Today we are less likely to fix a definition of "extraordinary means" on a particular treatment, but make decisions about even ordinary medical protocols on the basis of the patient's overall medical condition and life circumstance.

Decisions like this have also been viewed as choosing between "the lesser of two evils." Sometimes the only course of action open to us appears to include options that simply cannot be seen as "good." The choice between a more imminent death and less suffering could be

viewed this way. Certain political or business decisions might also be construed in such a way.

A well-known German Lutheran pastor and theologian in Nazi Germany articulated certain decisions he made during his lifetime in this way. Dietrich Bonhoeffer became involved in an assassination plot against Adolph Hitler. In Bonhoeffer's terms, the only choices open to him involved evil: He could do nothing, letting Hitler continue his violent, destructive rule. Or, he could take up a position in the plot against him.

Political assassination against one's national leader is hardly a "good." Neither is letting an evil as profound as Hitler continue. Less radical means of ridding the world of the Nazi regime were deemed impossible, so for Bonhoeffer, the responsible decision was to assume a role in the plot against Hitler. He viewed his life situation as a "boundary situation" calling for action that would ordinarily be rejected.

Dramatic decisions like end of life medical treatments and political assassination in Nazi Germany are hardly daily events. Still, they illustrate well the choices that really are part of daily living. Working through the situations produced by a teenager experimenting with drugs, financial decisions surrounding the purchase of a new car, decisions about employment or relationships, often play out in parallel fashion.

Very often the choices we face con-

front us with the task of weighing the goods and harms that will potentially result from our actions. Consideration of the actions open to us, the intentions with which we approach the decision, and the circumstances involved all contribute to the eventual course of action that we will undertake. Because every moral decision is a decision in a very unique and particular situation, the framework is often much more complicated than a simple choice of "good versus evil." It is also much more personal, just because every decision is a particular one. The precise confluence of personalities and the individual histories and needs of all involved will enter into our decision-making process, as will the convictions and values we seek to uphold and the religious and other communities to which we belong.

The resources that can help us as we deliberate about such decisions come from a variety of sources. These include the moral teachings of our church, our own past experience and reasoning, our friends and advisors, the social fabric of professions and information centers that regularly assist us. The complicated nature of moral decision-making should not overwhelm us, but can actually serve to bring us into deeper relationship with the individuals and communities that are most significant to us.

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

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Kids' Answers from page 9:

1. Malachi, 2. Joshua, 3. Paul, 4. Minoa, 5. mean, 6. new Bethlehem, 7. piano