

COLUMNISTS

Do we want to do what's right?

I think moral theologians and other educators have spent too much time worrying about our heads and not enough about our hearts. Over the past several decades, we've had scores of books, courses and lectures on conscience formation. These efforts often outline better ways to think about our actions. We have learned a great deal about analyzing the circumstances surrounding human actions, about investigating the significance of our motives and intentions, about exploring the meaning of individual actions and decisions.

This is commendable by itself, for sure. It assumes that human beings are capable of more and better intellectual comprehension, and that increased knowledge can have a significant effect on our actions. It rests on the thesis that by increasing our ability to think about our behavior, we can enhance moral development and improve ourselves and society.

All that is true, to some degree. The problem I have is that it is not enough. It truly is important to know more about our actions, the motivations that bring them about, and the consequences that may flow from them. But it is also important to shape the affective side of our being so that we come to want what is right. Knowing the right thing to do is only part of the story. Desiring that thing is important, too.



the
moral
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

In my own life, I often know the right thing to do. The reason I don't do it, however, is that I don't want it enough. In the realm of finances, for example, I have a certain amount of money available to me to spend. I understand quite well the needs of those less fortunate than myself. I have spent many hours in classes where top-level instructors have talked about the effect that frivolous spending in wealthy nations has on the impoverished multitudes in poorer lands. I know of many causes all around me in this community that would benefit if I spent my limited funds differently. My problem is NOT a lack of knowledge; it's a lack of desire.

Human beings really can develop better, nobler, wiser wants. Such a change in our desire is not just a matter of knowing more. It's more training than "education."

I'm talking about character formation, growth in virtue. It is the aspect of moral development most often associated with the formation of habits. Character. I'm talking here not about the formation of conscience, which is directed at better thinking about our actions, but about the development of character, which includes not just thinking, but also desiring.

In older schemes of understanding the human person, educators talked about our intellect and will. I'm talking about the shaping of the will; the affective part of us that shapes our intentions, develops our motives, informs what we want. In some traditional schemes of human action three steps to action were outlined: deliberation, judgment and command. Deliberation and judgment required good thinking. I suppose those two referred to the action of our consciences. We need to think clearly about our options and come to an intellectual judgment about what to do.

It's that third step that I'm concerned about here — command. Even as we come to decide on the right course of action and benefit from good clear thinking, we still have to motivate ourselves to bring that action into being. It is precisely here that I think we have fallen down in our educational efforts, of adults as well as children.

Shaping our wants is a change that re-

sults from repeated behaviors. We come to want to pray more and better by actually praying — not by learning about prayer. We come to want to be honest by telling the truth — not by reading a moral treatise on lying. We come to be a good friend by actually behaving like one. We come to be generous and want to become more generous by concrete acts of service to others, not because we know more about generosity than others do.

One of the great prayers of the Lenten season is "Create in me O God a clean heart." I invite all religious educators this Lent to think a bit about how our programs in religious formation, whether for children, teens or adults, reinforce this notion of character formation. We need not only desire to give our students better ideas about faith, but to provide them with the resources to undertake training in virtue. We all need to consider ways in which our hearts can be made new. A truly beneficial Lent will focus not only on the external disciplines we may undertake, but an actual program of character formation directed at internal changes to help us want what is better, nobler and more Gospel-centered.

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

Jesus teaches us how to say 'no'

1st Sunday of Lent (March 4): (R3) Luke 4:1-13; (R1) Deuteronomy 26:4-10; (R2) Romans 10:8-13.

After our Lord had been baptized, he received the Holy Spirit and was led by the Spirit into the desert for 40 days where he was tempted by the devil.

Satan offered him gifts — good gifts. He offered him bread. Jesus was very hungry after a 40 day fast. Bread is basic, necessary for life, yet Jesus refused Satan's offer.

Next Satan offered Jesus power if only he would pay him homage. Satan does not offer Jesus lust or greed or any bad thing. He offers Jesus a good thing: power. And of course power in the hands of Jesus would surely be power to do good. Generally, power is always given for noble things, like economic development or national self-determination or power to liberate people or power to reform some aberration in the church or society.

We live in a culture that values power. Since most of us have bread and enough to spare, much time is spent trying to get more power. We want power to live our lives as we please, to make the choices that we want to make. We admire people who have power and know how to use it. Satan offered Jesus all the power one could want: power over all the kingdoms of the



a word
for
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

world. Still Jesus refuses.

Finally, sensing the sort of person Jesus is, Satan offered him religion. "Throw yourself down from the parapet of the temple." Wouldn't it have been a great exhibition of faith, to throw oneself down from the temple top and expect divine intervention? Again Jesus says, "No."

After these renunciations, Satan slinks away "to await another opportunity."

Isn't it interesting that Jesus is first known to us not by what he does, but for what he refuses?

The temptation story shows Jesus rejecting the way of self-satisfaction, power and glory and accepting the way of suffering and the cross. The story tells us that Jesus must have been conscious of quite exceptional powers even at this time of his

life. The whole point of the temptations is that they could only have come to a man who could do astonishing things. It is no temptation to us to turn stones into bread or leap from a temple top, for the simple reason that it is impossible for us. These temptations could have come only to a man whose powers were unique and who had to decide how to use them.

The first temptation was to try to bribe people with material gifts into following him. The task of Christianity is not to make life a bed of roses, but to produce new men, who will produce a new world.

The second temptation was the temptation to compromise. The devil said; "just compromise a little with evil and men will follow you." Jesus' answer was, "God is God, and right is right and wrong is wrong. There can be no compromise in the war with evil." G.K. Chesterton said that the tendency of the world is to see things in terms of an indeterminate gray; but the duty of the Christian is to see things in terms of black and white. As Carlyle said, "The Christian must be consumed by the conviction of the infinite beauty of holiness and the infinite damnability of sin."

The final temptation was to reduce religion to sensationalism. Jesus knew the

sensationalist never lasts. He knew that only the cross leads to the crown.

Thomas Jefferson was a brilliant man who knew in heart and mind the evils of slavery, yet could never bring himself to free his slaves. He knew it was wrong, but he could not say, "No." How often we find it hard to say "No" to what is wrong.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, March 5

Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18;

Matthew 25:31-46

Tuesday, March 6

Isaiah 55:10-11; Matthew 6:7-15

Wednesday, March 7

Jonah 3:1-10; Luke 11:29-32

Thursday, March 8

Esther C:12, 14-16, 23-25;

Matthew 7:7-12

Friday, March 9

Ezekiel 18:21-28; Matthew 5:20-26

Saturday, March 10

Deuteronomy 26:16-19;

Matthew 5:43-48



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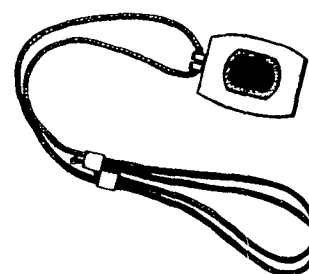
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