

# COLUMNISTS

## A reflection on breakthrough ideas

I have mismanaged my time significantly, so thinking about the column for this week has been done while racing from event to event. I am aware of feeling like I have to "think quick and short." That's really not a good way to enter into reflection on moral matters, I assure you. Still, it has brought me to a few interesting moments of thought. What I ended up doing is to try to think of three ideas put forth across the history of ethics that constitute for me breakthrough notions in the field. This little exercise has fit the bill for thinking quickly, and has proved a bit challenging as well.

My first source is Aristotle. I take many ideas from him, but I particularly like the lesson supplied by the structure of his major work in the field of ethics, *Nicomachean Ethics*. He wrote the book in 10 chapters. The first eight chapters deal with principles and rules, situations and circumstances that present difficulties in applying these, and styles of moral decision-making. This is pretty ordinary fare, really. But the interesting piece is the way the two final chapters deal with friendship. The insight that comes from this structure, I think, is Aristotle's view that the whole point of the moral life, the whole aim of shaping ourselves into better people and the effort we put into becoming better moral decision makers, is becoming people capable of sustaining friendship.

This is an absolutely marvelous view of morality. The goal of all we do in the realm of decision-making and character formation is to shape ourselves into peo-



the moral life.

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ple capable of friendship. It is not automatic that we are able to enter into and sustain the fidelity required of human relationships. That requires formation and the shaping of a self. Aristotle saw that as the point of the moral life. This is an astonishing insight and, in my opinion, one of the best of all time. Christian writers adopted this idea and applied it to our relationship with God. The reason we attempt to live the moral life is our effort to become a person capable of relationship with God.

A second breakthrough idea from the field of ethics for me comes from the tradition of Catholic social thought. The notions that constitute this whole body of writing, largely by popes and church councils and synods, originally come from efforts by ordinary priests and parishioners who saw the plight of destitute people around them and tried to help. Gradually these efforts became known in Rome and formed the background for the social encyclical tradition. The main insight I take from this body of writing is that the church, in imitation of Jesus, belongs where people are in trouble.

As the social tradition evolved, it moved beyond "we the church ought to help those whose lives are messed up." In fact, the insight became much more: God is encountered, understood and loved best in the struggle to relieve suffering, oppression, the lack of freedom, the failure to find peace. That insight really did change the entire direction of Catholic action in the world, and it became a foundation for the Second Vatican Council. It evolved over several decades, it affected the church in its smallest villages and in its very center, it emerged from the grassroots and it found its way to the very "top." We're still struggling to grasp its full meaning, but it absolutely won't let us rest.

The third breakthrough idea for me comes from Valerie Saiving, a professor at Hobart and William Smith College. In a 1960 essay, Professor Saiving pointed out that while most Christians have used a particular framework for what sin and grace look like, this particular framework appears to apply more accurately to men's experience than women's experience. She offered the insight that the careers and experiences that had been open to men had delivered them into a world where pride and self-aggrandizement were probably the greatest source of sinfulness. In contrast, women's experience had rendered them a different sort of experience where an entirely different notion of sinfulness prevailed. Saiving felt that this notion of sin and sinfulness had never really been considered seriously.

She pointed out that women's sin is more realistically rooted not in pride and

the selfish advancement of the self, but in the false denial of the self and a failure to attend to self-development. This basic lack of attention to healthy self-fulfillment leads to traits like a tolerance for mediocrity at the expense of excellence, lack of respect for reason, and a kind of gossipy sociability. When I first came across it, I was astonished at the obvious but overlooked truth that Saiving's idea revealed to me. As I reflected on it even further, I became aware of the important underlying reality to which it pointed: Our appreciation of the way sin and grace operate in the lives of people is lacking to the extent that any of our "groups" are excluded from the field of moral theology. Women as well as men should become moral theologians. So should representatives from all our ethnic, racial and national groups. So should people from all walks of life and all sorts of cultural foundations. Otherwise, we miss discovering how God is experienced truly, really, and in the real particulars of human life.

By now you must be disgusted that I have hardly mentioned Jesus. I find the single most powerful moral image from Jesus' life to be his treatment of the woman caught in adultery. Moral theology ought never to be used as a "club" for disciplining the "bad guys and gals." WE need moral theology because we are so very weak, really, and because God's love is so inviting—in spite of all our failings and the misery we bring on ourselves. Praise God!

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

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