

COLUMNISTS

Observing rules is part of character formation

I wonder whether the rules we're supposed to keep are important only because they maintain order. By modifying our behavior and the behavior of those around us, rules prevent chaos from breaking out all around us. They hinder us in our quest for absolute personal gratification so that we don't tread on the others. Don't steal. Don't lie. Show up on time. Don't litter. Keep your promises. Don't waste time at work. Pay your debts. Keep the speed limit. Don't drink and drive. Don't have sex with someone you're not married to. Be faithful to your spouse.

Keeping these kinds of rules keeps us out of our neighbors' territory and prevents us from hurting them.

Other kinds of rules seem to have a different purpose. They exist for the purpose of caring for ourselves. In this sense, they sound more positive. They tell us to do things that will contribute to our own good, or to avoid things that may hurt us. Go to church. Pray to God. Exercise. Eat right. Floss. Get enough rest. Don't work too hard. Work on healthy relationships that invite growth and avoid stagnation. Don't smoke. Wear a helmet while motorcycling.

Obviously some of these rules work both ways. They both prevent us from hurting others and help ourselves, and vice versa. Everyone is mad these days at secondhand smoke. And more and more of us wonder whether we ought to help pay for health care for those who don't take care of themselves or who engage in



the
moral
life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

risky behavior. I like to question football, for example, where players seem to need countless surgeries to keep them going. Doesn't football drive up the cost of health care for everybody?

Anyway, the point of rules seems in part to be the order they impose on the world. Order is, of course, a good thing in most instances so we are relieved about it. We praise rules and are grateful for standards we hold in common that help to restrain the bad behavior that others are tempted to do. They also help give direction to obligations we have toward ourselves and can assist us in reigning in our own tendency to selfishness. Even Jesus seemed to be insistent on the value of rules when he told us he had not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it.

The value and benefit of laws and rules, and their prominence in religious systems of all kinds, could, however, cause us to think that the main benefit even of Catholicism is in the moral code it offers. We might come to think that if we keep all the rules, we're automatical-

ly good Catholics. Or we could come to assume that if somebody breaks the rules, they're automatically bad ones. But we all have a sense that this simply can't be the whole story. We all have a sense that life is more than good rule-keeping, and that external behavior, however good or however bad, simply does not sum up the whole of any one of us.

I keep thinking that rules are at their best not when they're bridling our bad behavior, but when they are pointing us toward traits we ought to be developing. I think rules work best as shorthand as we try to shape ourselves to be particular kinds of people. We need to learn to see the world rightly before we can act in it rightly. Rules give us quick reminders of the kind of filters through which we ought to be seeing the world.

Instead of just not lying, we ought to come upon the situations of our lives looking for truth. We ought to become truth-tellers in the sense of being people who automatically tell the truth. Not just that we make decisions not to lie, but that we are skilled in how to see the truth of a situation and are able to tell it to others in ways they can understand. Instead of just not breaking this or that promise, we come to be people who are actually capable of guaranteeing themselves over time.

Rules sound like they're really about discrete pieces of behavior, but I think they are really about shaping our character and developing habits of self. The

decisions we make in individual circumstances may not be as important as the decisions we don't make because we automatically respond to what we see. Rules may work best as guides to the behaviors that, repeated often enough, come to shape the way we see the world.

People who tell the truth often eventually come to see the world truthfully and automatically speak the truth. People who do not steal eventually become honest people who simply don't take what isn't theirs. They are not making decisions about this day in and day out. They have become honest people who have learned to see the world in a certain way and their behavior corresponds to that.

Somehow I don't think that when we die and stand at the pearly gates Jesus or his delegate will be there to ask whether we kept all the rules. I simply don't believe that admission there will be only for the rule-abiders.

The rules of any institution, including our church, work best for us as guides to self-formation. They help us learn to see life in such a way that we come to shape our actions so that we do the right thing in the right way, and we do so because that is the sort of person we have become. The moral life best understood is always about becoming a certain kind of person and seeing our individual actions as part of this adventure.

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

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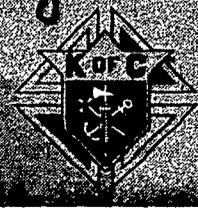


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