

COLUMNISTS

Truthfulness may depend on circumstances

I suppose we've all been faced with situations which call our otherwise firm commitment to truth telling into question. Aunt Bessie's query as to whether we like her new hat might constitute such a situation. Soldiers interrogated by the enemy who want to know in which direction others in the company ran is another.

Various forms of moral reasoning try to help us in these cases. One strategy would be to dig our heels in and simply announce that we should uphold the principle no matter what. "Aunt Bessie, that is the ugliest hat on top of the worst hairdo ever to appear in this town." Good for principles, but you're probably out of the will. "My buddies went over that ridge to our right." Good for honesty, but bad for patriotism and loyalty in times of war.

At the opposite extreme would be a radical form of "situation ethics" that would have us act as if principles didn't even exist. Simply feel the situation out and do whatever occurs to us at the moment. No decision making at all. Do whatever feels best. The trouble with this method is that we are all prone to seek out the solution that benefits ourselves no matter what claim others may have. This tendency to serve our own self interest can be illustrated by an example from Buddhist wisdom that reminds us of a com-



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

mon human disposition that surfaces when we come across a group picture that includes ourselves. Guess whose face we look for first?

So what do we do?

First, we have to admit that there really isn't any "formula" for making the right moral decision in tough cases. At times we'd all welcome a recipe or a computer program that would invite us to just "add the ingredients" of the case and out would pop "the right answer." Lots of us picture the moral life just that simply: It's about getting the one right answer to the sometimes puzzling encounters of our life.

Second, we need to recognize that moral decision-making does indeed require a form of "situation ethics." The whole point of moral theology and thinking about the moral life is so that we can

act rightly in particular situations. Reflecting on an abstract level is good exercise for the mind, but until we get down to the "nitty gritty" of real life situations, our reflection remains abstract and unreal. There's no point in solving abstractions. Moral theology and Christian ethics exist for concrete situations.

Third, we might look for assistance outside ourselves. The new "Catechism of the Catholic Church" offers great insight into making moral decisions. In the section on conscience, it reminds us that conscience operates on three levels. The first is the level of general principle. We should know that there are commonly accepted principles, values, rules and convictions that exist as sources of wisdom. "Tell the truth." "Keep your promises." "Help those in need." On we go.

The second level cited by the catechism is the level of applying the principles we seek to uphold. Maybe there is a more tactful way to let Bessie know that, in your opinion, her hat is not the highpoint of modern fashion without brutalizing her ego. Maybe you can come to the point of recognizing that in battle situations other principles, like saving a life, override the duty to tell the truth. Skills of applying and using principles rightly are acquired by experience. This often involves a deli-

cate route of trial and error, but we need to live in order to develop this skill.

The catechism's third level is that of concrete decision-making. We have to decide what to do in the precise mixture of circumstances in front of us. Maybe Aunt Bessie is a crusty old dame who would welcome a frank and direct response. If she's a delicate and gentle soul, a different response might be required.

The seriousness of decisions required in times of war and their deadly consequences shed light on the options that may be open to us. This is true in many of the situations we face in our lives, too. Real life situations, with all their nuances and particularities, mean that we have to develop more skills than simple recitation of the principles involved in forming our actions. The philosopher Aristotle, echoed in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, insisted that the point of the moral life is "doing the right thing rightly." It's not enough to seek "the right answer." It's a matter of responding to what the situation demands in the light of what we believe most deeply. That takes the skill of a developed character and a formed conscience.

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Obstacles to Christian unity

In an interview prior to the May meeting of the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Karl Lehmann of Mainz, Germany, said that the papacy is "the principal obstacle" to progress toward Christian unity.

This echoed Pope Paul VI's 1967 confession that the papacy is "undoubtedly the gravest obstacle in the path of ecumenism." Like Paul VI, who certainly believed that the Office of Peter exercises a ministry of primacy by the will of Christ, Cardinal Lehmann was doubtless referring to how that primacy functions today — a legitimate topic for ecumenical discussion, as Pope John Paul II wrote in the 1995 encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*.

Thirty-five years after the Second Vatican Council, one wonders whether the papacy is the "principal obstacle" or the "gravest obstacle" to the unity which Christ left his church as an abiding gift. There is no point indulging in a sweepstakes of blame. Surely there are other serious obstacles to Christian unity.

That there are pastoral leaders and theologians in the Orthodox churches who consider Roman Catholics heretics — while Catholics consider the Orthodox "sister churches" — is a serious obstacle.

The general secretary of the World Council of Churches put a serious ob-



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BY GEORGE WEIGEL

stacle in the path of ecumenical progress in 1995 when he proposed abandoning the classic ecumenical goal of a Christianity unified around a common creed, a common baptism, and a common Eucharist. Dr. Konrad Raiser's parallel claim, that work together on environmental protection, peacemaking and world poverty has more consequence for ecumenism than doctrinal dialogue and agreement, compounded the problem.

The moral confusions evident in some mainline Protestant communities are a serious obstacle to Christian unity. When the General Assembly of the (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland endorses the creation of cloned human embryos for the sole purpose of experimenting on them and then killing them,

that is a serious obstacle to Christian unity. When some mainline Protestant leaders attempt moral justifications for abortion and euthanasia, that is a grave obstacle to Christian unity.

One also has to ask whether much of the Protestant world, in the five centuries since the Reformation, hasn't lost a sacramental sense of reality — that intuition which takes seriously the "givenness" of things, in the conviction that the extraordinary and transcendent are revealed through the stuff of this world — water, oil, and salt; bread and wine; sexual love within the bond of marriage.

When the Anglican Communion debates priestly and episcopal ordination of women in sociological rather than sacramental terms, that is a serious impediment to Christian unity and bespeaks a diminished sense of sacramentality.

The most hopeful frontier of North American ecumenism involves Catholics and evangelical Protestants. Here, too, there are serious obstacles, including the thin notion of "church" to which the great majority of evangelicals adhere. To think of "the church" as "that gathering of individuals who occupy the same worship space on Sunday morning" is an impediment to Christian unity.

There are also serious psychological blockages to ecumenical progress early in this century. Over the course of a millennium of division, many Orthodox Christians have made a deeply anti-Roman attitude an essential part of their Orthodoxy; to be an Orthodox Christian, to them, means not to be in communion with the bishop of Rome. A similar psychology of division affects many Protestants, mainline and evangelical.

At the same time, and to reverse Cardinal Lehmann's concerns, it is precisely the capacity of the current bishop of Rome to be a global witness to the Gospel and a global defender of religious freedom that has helped jump-start ecumenical dialogue between American evangelical Protestants and Catholics. A vigorous, evangelical exercise of the primacy that puts preaching the truth of God in Christ first has begun to assuage centuries of suspicion about the papacy.

Ecumenical seriousness requires acknowledging that there are many serious obstacles to Christian unity. Making the Petrine primacy work for all isn't the only issue. It may not even be the gravest.

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