

COLUMNISTS

What we didn't learn about mortal sin

When we used to teach about sin, especially to young people, we were inclined to use teaching techniques designed for efficient and long-lasting learning. Thus, we used a slogan many of us still remember. The teacher asked what conditions are necessary for mortal sin, and the students offered a three-part answer: serious matter, sufficient reflection and full consent of the will.

I used that formula when I taught eighth-grade students in the '60s and '70s. It was great because my students could remember it, it made sense, and their parents and I were assured that learning was indeed taking place. For many of my students, the instruction I offered as part of their preparation for confirmation would be the last formal religious education they would receive. I knew this and lamented it. Some of them rejoiced.

Because the students were 13 or 14 years old, I had to overlook the more abstract nuances of the three-part formula. The fact that one of the conditions for mortal sin was objective and the other two were subjective, and rather more difficult to explain, meant that I focused on the first condition: serious matter. I told them what constituted serious matter. They left my classroom pretty aware of what they already knew: Serious matter refers to murder, theft, adultery, neglecting worship on Sunday, premarital sex, marrying after civ-



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

il divorce and so forth.

I didn't spend much time on sufficient reflection and full consent of the will. Thirteen-year-olds weren't very interested in whatever that meant. And I honestly felt that their parents were more satisfied that they knew what really bad acts were so they'd avoid them. Religion classes at school would reinforce the behaviors parents were trying to instill, and positive social mores could be reinforced along the way. I was pretty satisfied with this arrangement and thought I was doing a good job.

As I look back now and reflect in light of some moves that have been made in contemporary moral theology, I'd like a chance to explain more to those students. Serious sinning involves both subjective and objective conditions. I think we all forget that at times. In fact, the "weight of the equation" falls on the side of the subjec-

tive. What's happening inside of me, my thinking and deciding, are essential for serious sin. It's not just performing an objectively evil act. That's not new and radical stuff at all.

The trouble is, I suppose, that since we were dealing so often with young teens, the more abstract and difficult-to-define concepts of sufficient reflection and full consent of the will were left behind. Lots of us grew up content to assume that sin equals committing an objectively evil act. And many Catholics never had an opportunity for further education in faith, let alone adult education.

This overemphasis on the objective and neglect of the subjective meant that for many people, sin was simply a matter of behavior. The form we observed for the sacrament of confession reinforced this notion. We went into a darkened space and recounted our "sins." I spent a large part of my life in this regard recalling numbers. My teachers had been firm in their instruction about telling Father how many times I did a thing. Sometimes if I neglected to include the number, Father would ask me. Internal sorrow or the desire for reconciliation with God often took second place to my incredible counting!

The penance we received was also dispensed in numbers: five Our Fathers, four Hail Marys. It seemed to my brother and me that the more prayers assigned, the

more serious the "crime." There was a real mathematical equation to the thing and the quality of what was going on in one's "spiritual life" could sometimes seem to be a kind of calculation.

We need adult education today so that we can come together to reflect, among other things, on the relationship-with-God side of sin. At its core, sin isn't really a matter of behavior. It's a matter of relationship. When they changed the venue for the sacrament of confession — from a darkened space where numbers dominated, to a relational space where conversation about relationship with God could take place — we unfortunately failed to provide the educational foundation for people to be able to switch from counting to conversing about ourselves and God. Thus, people simply stopped using the sacrament. What a shame, really.

A resolution for all of us as we pass from glorious summer to the more ordinary routines of fall might be to take some opportunity for adult education in faith. Some theologians think that at the heart of the human being is a great hunger for God and the things of God. Why not test that theory personally with a bit of the learning that couldn't take place when we were younger?

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

Discipleship often involves risk

23rd Sunday of the Year (Sept. 9): (R3) Luke 14: 25-33; (R1) Wisdom 9:13-18; (R2) Philemon 9-10, 12-17.

People sometimes get caught up in a movement without thinking where their involvement is leading.

A large crowd followed Jesus — as usual. But many followed out of mere curiosity. Others because they had nothing better to do. Still others because he healed, or confronted the Scribes and Pharisees. But Jesus wasn't interested in those types of followers. Jesus wanted disciples, not gawkers. He wanted people who were willing to put their lives on the line. "If anyone comes to me without turning his back on father and mother, ... he cannot be my follower," said Jesus.

He meant that we ought to be detached. Often loyalty to Jesus can and will create tension with those we love. When St. Jane Frances de Chantal wanted to enter religious life, her son flung himself down on the floor in front of her. She had to step over his body and, though she loved him dearly, she did!

After speaking of the cost of discipleship, Jesus told two parables. One was on building a tower, the other on winning a



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

battle in war. The point of each parable was that one ought to sit down and calculate whether one has the wherewithal to build or to win.

Of course Jesus wasn't talking about building a tower or winning a victory. He was talking about building our lives and winning the battle of life. He knew many people who lived lives without knowing where they were going, whose only victory in life was to achieve material success. Jesus wanted to put them on the right track so as to build a blessed life and win the victory of life in the end.

A businessman went to Bavaria to see the famous Oberammergau Passion Play. The businessman met Anton Lang who

had portrayed Christ. Near Anton was the cross used in the play. The businessman wanted his wife to take his picture with him holding the cross. To his surprise he could hardly budge the cross.

He said to Anton, "I thought it would be hollow. Why do you carry such a heavy cross?" Anton answered, "If I did not feel the weight of the cross, I could not play the part." Following Christ involves carrying a cross — at times, a heavy one. No such cross, no crown.

St. Paul knew from experience the cost of following Christ. He had been shipwrecked, stoned, scourged three times, left for dead. In the second reading Paul is in prison. He meets a runaway slave Onesimus and discovers that he knows Onesimus' master, Philemon. Paul converts Onesimus and urges him to return to his master. Both Paul and Onesimus could be killed. Paul for aiding a runaway slave, Onesimus for running away.

So Paul writes a letter to Philemon asking him to forgive Onesimus and to receive him back. Philemon does, sending Onesimus back to Paul to be his servant (Colossians 4:9). Tradition says that eventually Onesimus became a bishop.

The greatest risk in life is to risk nothing. Discipleship is a way of life. It often requires risks. But the crosses are nothing compared with the rewards, the joy and the glory to come.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, September 10
Colossians 1:24-2:3;
Psalms 62:6-7, 9; Luke 6:6-11

Tuesday, September 11
Colossians 2:6-15; Psalms 145:1-2, 8-11; Luke 6:12-19

Wednesday, September 12
Colossians 3:1-11 Psalms 145:2-3, 10-13; Luke 6:20-26

Thursday, September 13
Colossians 3:12-17; Psalms 150:1-6; Luke 6:27-38

Friday, September 14
Numbers 21:4B-9; Psalms 78:1-2, 34-38; Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17

Saturday, September 15
1 Timothy 1:15-17; Psalms 113:1-5A, 6-7; John 19:25-27 or Luke 2:33-35

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Father Richard McBrien's column will return Sept. 13.

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