

# COLUMNISTS

## Secular professions share in God's work

At the beginning of the summer I embarked on a self-education program that I mentioned in a previous column: I wanted to learn about professional and business ethics. As the summer progressed I made use of every resource available: libraries, books, journals, the web, informal conversations with almost everyone I met.

Today I'm going to make a report on two of the most basic points that I learned. Due to the length of this column, I'm hardly able to do justice to the topic. But I think you'll like the outcome.

The first task I faced also offered the first insight of my learning. I asked the basic question of why we consider activities in the workplace to deserve attention in terms of their moral or religious significance. In another way, how does "the world" fit into our understanding of God, creation, and what God is doing in terms of sanctification and salvation. Pretty big theological issues, to be sure!

There are all kinds of theologians who have talked about this big picture. Some developed ideas about a "holy worldliness" that Christians would take to their jobs. The biblical prophets understood the whole world and all our activities to be sacred. Martin Luther was among the first to develop the idea of "vocation" to refer to the professions that people take up "in the world." For Luther it was monastic life, not business or politics, that did not fit into God's plan. He was convinced that monastic life did not serve anyone else on earth and that God did not call anyone to acquire salvation



the  
moral  
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

through works of piety that were not also works of service.

We might accuse Luther of not understanding monastic life, but it would seem that Catholicism erred in the opposite direction. Our viewpoint frequently tended to reserve the entire notion of vocation to priests and religious. We failed to integrate activity in and on behalf of the world — professional life, family and politics — into the notion of "calling" by God. The whole idea of human beings cooperating with God's activity in the world through secular pursuits has often been missing from our writings, preaching and basic approach to life.

Karl Rahner, the great 20th-century German theologian speaks critically of a mentality that kept "pious" Catholics aloof from political activity in the hope that others would do this "dirty work" for them so that they could remain "good." Even as we got to the point of recognizing a certain religious dignity in what we called the helping professions, like medicine, social work or education, we still neglected professions like journalism,

law, advertising and general commerce. These also serve the common good and provide for the human development of those who engage in them.

In my own daily routine I rely directly on many businesses that obviously fit right into the capitalistic scheme of things. They do indeed make money for their owners. But they also provide me with what I need to live: food stores, copier repair companies, computer sales and service, telephone and electric companies, manufacturers of almost everything that can be made and sold, and on and on. Looking at the world and our jobs in this way would invite us, I think, to view even the most secular of professions as fulfilling a "vocational call" and inviting us to go to work with a kind of religious and vocational motivation. This includes the contribution our work makes in terms of family care and the duties of the household.

This observation today hardly taps into the realm of business ethics at all. It does offer a look into the basic viewpoint that I developed over the summer. It also offers a segue to the second object of my learning. That is that the field of business ethics requires more conversation and a chance for ethicists to learn from business people. The books, articles and web sites available on this topic stand in need of another stage of development. Those who engage in the professions have to tell those of us in the religious fields about their "vocation." We need to understand more realistically their struggle to be co-creators with God as they

work in secular ways to bring about the sanctity of the world through the real, pragmatic and difficult decisions they face all the time.

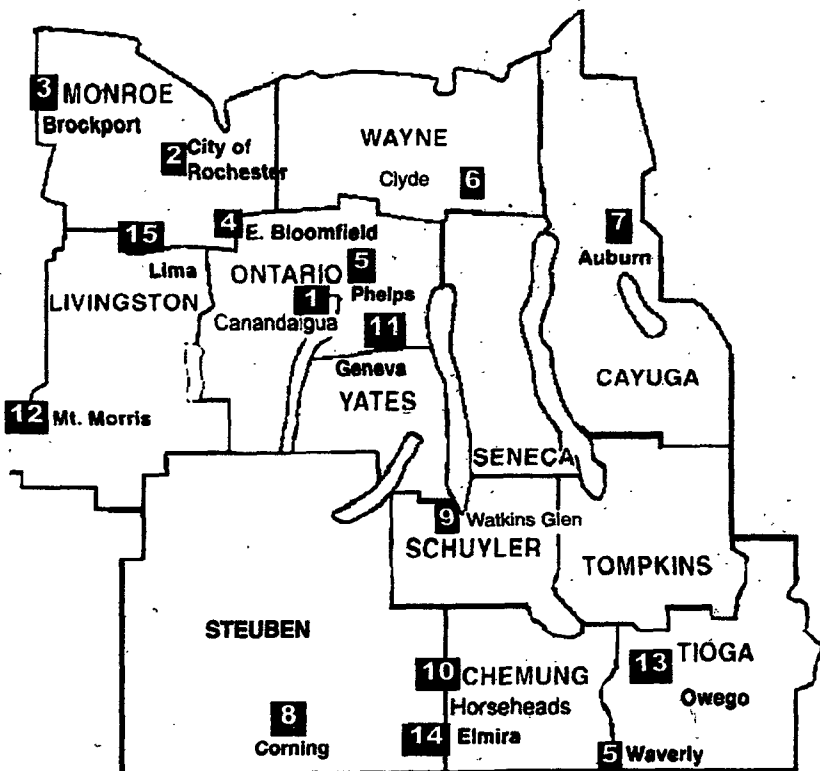
In pursuit of this goal, I'm happy to say that St. Bernard's Institute is offering an opportunity for just this kind of conversation. I invite anyone reading this column to attend. The first of the series will be held from 7:30-9 a.m. on Friday, Nov. 16. It will take place at the Strathallan at 550 East Ave. in Rochester. The topic will be the ethics of corporate downsizing. We plan to begin by hearing the observations of a business professional, Ed Kay from Price Waterhouse Coopers, followed by comments from ethicist Wade Robison from RIT. Then we will open the conversation to all who attend. If you'd like more information, call us at 716/271-3657.

My summer reading project seemed inadequate. I'm happy to have the opportunity to invite others to help me learn more about the dignity and struggle of the secular professions. The real heart of it was made real to me this past weekend as I visited "ground zero" in New York City. A fireman on break from his work stood drinking a cup of orange juice. As person after person moved past him, each one laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and spoke a word of thanks. The work of each one of us serves the others and is part of the very work of God. Let's talk about it.

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

## cemeteries

of the Rochester Catholic Diocese



- 1. Calvary Cemetery**  
Clark Street  
Parish Cemetery of  
St. Mary's, Canandaigua  
716-394-1220
- 2. Holy Sepulchre Cemetery & Mausoleum**  
2461 Lake Avenue  
Rochester, NY 14612  
716-458-4110
- 3. Mount Olivet Cemetery**  
East Canal Road  
Office: 152 Main Street  
Brockport, NY 14420  
716-637-4500
- 4. St. Bridget's/St. Joseph**  
15 Church Street  
East Bloomfield, NY 14443  
716-657-7626
- 5. St. James**  
503 Clark St  
Waverly, NY 14892  
607-565-2014
- 6. St. John's Cemetery**  
Geneva Street  
Clyde, NY 14433  
315-923-3941
- 7. St. Joseph's Cemetery**  
6020 Lake Ave. Ext.  
Auburn, NY 13021  
315-252-5197
- 8. St. Mary Cemetery**  
375 Park Avenue  
Office: 222 Dodge Ave.  
Corning, NY 14830  
607-936-4689
- 9. St. Mary's Cemetery Holy Cross Cemetery**  
Watkins Glen, NY 14891  
607-535-2786
- 10. St. Mary Our Mother**  
816 West Broad Street  
Horseheads, NY 14845  
607-739-3817
- 11. St. Mary's Regional Cemetery**  
Pre-Emption Rd.  
Geneva, NY 14456  
315-789-7180
- 12. St. Patrick's**  
Murray Street  
Office: 46 Stanley St.  
Mt. Morris, NY 14510  
716-658-2110
- 13. St. Patrick's**  
300 Main St.  
Owego, NY 13827  
607-687-1068
- 14. Sts. Peter & Paul's**  
623 Franklin St.  
Elmira, NY 14904  
607-732-6431
- 15. St. Rose**  
1985 Lake Avenue  
Lima, NY 14485  
716-624-1005

The cemeteries listed paid a nominal fee to be listed on this page. A number of other Catholic cemeteries chose not to be listed, primarily because they are no longer selling burial plots.