

# Probing tenets of faith



Patricia Schoelles, SSJ

The Moral Life

Sometimes this sort of discussion is perceived as inviting disloyalty to the church, or as undermining church authority by insinuating that the teaching itself is "not all there is." This exercise, if done respectfully and with sincerity, actually helps the development of faith and the understanding of our beliefs. As times change, so do the issues that involve us.

On the matter of capital punishment, we know that the church has traditionally permitted states to execute evildoers who cannot otherwise be restrained. This teaching has been based on the right and duty of governments to protect innocent citizens. But more recently, Scripture scholars are increasingly convinced that a unique aspect of Jesus' teaching was his commitment to absolute non-violence. Criminology experts become increasingly convinced that means are available today that enable us to effectively restrain evildoers without killing them.

Pope John Paul II and the American bishops have spoken out forcefully against capital punishment in ways that had not occurred previously. Their proclamations follow upon a process of questioning, speculating, gathering information from science and theology, and from the experience of believers engaged in the field. Adult education that makes this process available to intelligent Catholics today is a service to faith and not at all a detraction from it.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry.

At times significant controversy emerges in the area of moral theology, relating to the very heart of what theology is and does, and to what we think good teaching is.

In terms of understanding theology, it helps to think of a central dynamic in church life. Since the church teaches certain matters of doctrine, morals, common practice and policy, there needs to be not just the proclamation of the teaching, but also the attempt to understand and appreciate what the teaching actually says. Believers who want to understand their faith, think about and probe more deeply the tenets of faith. At its best, theology addresses this quest for understanding.

An associate once stated: "I don't see why there is any discussion about the Ten Commandments. They just are. Just hear them and do them." I immediately asked: "But what about 'keeping holy the Lord's day'? What does that really mean? Does it have to do with blue laws and not shopping on Sunday? Does it mean going to church only, or does it have to do with the whole 24-hour period? Does it mean taking care to get a job with no work requirements on Sunday? Is it more like legislation with precise requirements, or does it set a goal for some period of change of pace each week?" Others present began offering opinions and interpretations.

Moral theology explains church teaching on issues relating to morality. It also attempts to relate the teaching to the actual life of believers living in a particular situation at a given time.

This means that questioning needs to occur. Practitioners of moral theology engage in speculation about the meaning of a given teaching, especially when applied to complex, actual situations.

In terms of teaching, particularly in adult education, I have tried to develop a method that can foster both clarity and invite participants to honor the questions they have as part of the movement to deeper faith. I start out by explaining what a given teaching is, informing students about documents they can consult to find the matter discussed and to show a little of the history surrounding the development and proclamation on a given issue.

For some audiences that is quite enough. Sometimes, though, a particular teaching is surrounded by questioning that emerges because of circumstances created by the culture we live in, by other dimensions of the faith tradition, by new knowledge from science or technology, or by the experience of believers. After I have explained a particular moral issue, I ask adult groups if they would like to hear some of the questions associated with the issue.



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

## MORE LETTERS

bad if: a bishop possibly tries to correct a wayward soul; a politician is conservative — see list of Sen. Santorum's supposed sins; Mrs. Brown didn't make McBrien aware she disapproved of Bush 41's politics in 1988; and Randall Terry, why he is just a terrible person.

Is this a "consistent ethic of life?"

A vote for a pro-abortion politician is a vote to continue the killing.

Ken Conway  
Bell Road, Red Creek

## Priest served after retiring

To the editor:

I enjoyed reading Father Eugene McFarland's biography, including the fact Father is celebrating the 60th anniversary of his ordination. Your story ends with his retirement from parish administration in 1988. But

his active priesthood continued until not long ago when he was "in residence" here at St. Mary's, Geneseo. It was a delight having Father Mac here with us. We enjoyed his excellent, but brief homilies. "No souls are saved after the first 10 minutes," he would remind us. And his jokes at the conclusion of Mass were second to none. Wouldn't Jesus want us to leave Mass with a smile on our face?

Together with our beloved pastor, Father Bill Gordinier, Father McFarland was part of a marvelous team. We were so blessed to have these fine men serve the needs of Catholics in Geneseo.

St. Mary's Parish will be honored this Saturday, June 7, to help Father celebrate his 60th anniversary. Congratulations, and thank you, Father Mac. Ad multos annos!

David J. Dwyer  
Geneseo

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