

Educator probes conscience, faith

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

RUSH — As we make decisions both big and small throughout the day, there's a lot more than brain power at work. Somewhere deep inside, the conscience is playing a major role — and has been doing so for many, many years.

"This is already in us, this facet of our union with God," stated Sister Patricia Schoelles, president of St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry in Pittsford.

Yet wrestling with one's conscience isn't nearly as simple as an angel talking in one ear while the devil talks in the other. "If I'm good I go to heaven, and if I'm bad I go to hell" — as I got older, I thought that it's got to be more than that," Sister Schoelles remarked Oct. 6 at the Creekside Inn.

Her appearance was part of a diocesan-sponsored "Theology on Tap" series for young adults. Other Theology on Tap themes at the Creekside last month were Catholic guilt; Catholic voting; and marriage and separation. The series was sponsored by several parishes in southern Monroe and northern Livingston counties.

Sister Schoelles said following one's conscience is rarely a clear-cut process. Therefore we must invoke the principle of proportionality, which is "not really about good vs. evil, but the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils. It's more, how can I do the most good, knowing that every single human act has good and bad consequences?" she said.

For instance, Sister Schoelles hypothesized that if she had encountered a car accident on the way to the Creekside that night, she might have been faced with several decisions in a short time frame: would she be too squeamish to offer proper medical assistance? Was she on a busy road where she could flag other people down for help? Would her attending to the accident cause her to miss her speaking engagement? Would her lack of prompt action cause lives to be lost?

Sister Schoelles said three factors must be weighed in determining whether a decision is moral or immoral: the act itself, the circumstances and the intention. "Is it enough to know what a person did, to determine whether it is moral or not?" she asked the gathering of approximately 25 people.

Giving an extreme example, Sister

Schoelles said if a deranged uncle had walked into the room and she shot him dead; that act alone may not be enough for others to gauge its morality. Perhaps she knew he was planning to set off a live hand grenade and kill everyone in the room — but on the other hand, perhaps there was a large inheritance that she stood to collect.

Some of the evening's participants felt that simply citing church teachings — "doing what you're told to do," as Sister Schoelles put it — is not enough, that following your conscience calls for deeper reflection.

"Some Catholics think if they know the principles, they don't have to do the application," Sister Schoelles said.

"It seems like there is a very fine line between holding a moral standard and being judgmental," added Dave Muench, 30, of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Rochester.

And who has the final say on morality, when Catholics are at odds with each other over such subjects as war, the death penalty and homosexuality? Wedding your conscience with any religion's laws can also be hard because "I don't think there's anybody on earth who believes everything in their faith," said Vicki Bowman, 31, of Good Shepherd Parish in Henrietta.

Sister Schoelles said it's quite natural for one's conscience to evolve, based on life experience: She drew laughs as she described how an irate driver once yelled at her for jaywalking, and she never jaywalked again. She also acknowledged that the Catholic Church itself has evolved, especially since the Second Vatican Council. However, she emphasized that basic Catholic moral principles guiding the conscience are timeless.

"There's controversy, there's change — then there's the core of faith. Sometimes I'm just clinging to the core to get away from the controversy," Sister Schoelles said.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Theology on Tap is a diocesan program for young adults in their 20s and 30s. For information about future Theology on Taps and other diocesan-sponsored young-adult events, visit the Young Adult and Campus Ministry link at dor.org; e-mail Shannon Loughlin, diocesan director of young adult and campus ministry, at loughlin@dor.org; or call 585/328-3210, ext. 1218 or 1279.



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