

Fundamentals in Moral Education

By Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes

A professor of psychology thought he was realizing the basic goals he had set for himself in life. He was married with a family and a successful teaching career in Boston College's School of Education. Life was not without its tensions and challenges, but reasonably tranquil. Then one day his wife startled him with the news that she was going to begin a new life without him. He was devastated!

In explaining the decision she had come to make, she spoke of "Self-fulfillment," "realizing her potential" and experiencing "human liberation." God would understand because his love is unconditional. Suddenly the psychologist realized that the teaching of the personalist schools of psychology, which he had been proposing, not only in school but also at home, had backfired. These developments challenged him to a conversion.

The man, William Kilpatrick, then wrote his provocative book, "Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong." Kilpatrick proposes that there is a parallel between what educational philosophers did in reading, writing and arithmetic, and what educational psychologists have done in moral education. In both instances teachers moved away from presenting the basic truths and skills. Instead, they tried to engage the students by asking them to discuss the theory. This methodology led students to learn to question issues before they even learned the basics.

It belongs to educators on the primary school level to resolve the debate about phonics. But as a member of the United States Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Catechism, I can attest that this pedagogical approach has been prevalent in catechetical materials. We review catechetical texts for their doctrinal conformity with the "Catechism of the Catholic Church." Hence our focus is primarily on the content. But we have come to realize that the very teaching methodology can undermine the presentation of doctrine. When the focus is more on the students' questions than on the basic teaching of doctrine, then the presentation of the faith becomes very tentative. So, in these instances we withhold a positive judgment on conformity until this is corrected.

For example, to ask students what they think about Sunday Mass, sexual activity before marriage or cheating on exams before presenting the teaching and helping the students appreciate it through the example of virtuous models is to suggest that the truth is more related to what they think than to objective reality. If we invite students to question the Church's teaching, we suggest that the teaching is tentative, not normative.

There are at least three stages in good moral teaching. Young children need to learn the basic concrete moral parameters both in word and in example. Young adults need to be helped to seek understanding about their faith since issues arising from the environment and themselves can call the faith or moral teaching into question. Mature adults need to grow in depth of their understanding and living the faith and moral life. If we fail on the first level, the superstructure collapses.

The best way to present moral teaching on each of the levels is to help others to recognize that the Church's teaching and virtuous behavior lead to happiness. The saints are good examples of this. Saints are happy people. They have found the inner secret of the relationship between, a virtuous life and inner joy. This does not mean that they do not encounter adversity. They have learned how to handle adversity with grace. They have discovered that suffering can deepen and strengthen faith rather than undermine it. Considerable suffering in the world is unnecessary. Many people increase their own suffering through immoral behavior. Saints know that pleasure is good as a by-product of doing what is right; pleasure is bad when we seek it as an end in itself. Blessed Therese of Calcutta and Pope John Paul II are examples in our own time of holiness in the midst of suffering. Both lived happy lives, brought happiness to others and showed others how to live.

One final point: it is misleading to call God's love unconditional. God's love is faithful even when we sin. But there are consequences for sinful behavior!

We need not be afraid of straightforward moral teaching. In fact, we betray our children or students, if we do not. The Ten Commandments offer the inspired outline for moral living. We need to present that teaching in the context of the Beatitudes as the road to happiness. And we need to introduce those we teach to the saints!

This article appeared in the *Clarion Herald* on September 16, 2006. It is reproduced here with permission.