

## WHY TEACH ETHICS?

By Dr. Olga R. Rasmussen, D.Min.

The teaching of ethics is an essential component of any well-rounded Catholic religious education curriculum. As someone who taught bioethics, morality, and social justice for over 23 years, I feel strongly that these subjects are perhaps the most relevant in religious education, because they touch each and every life in very many ways.

The world our students will inherit will be fundamentally more complex than the one most adults grew up in. If you stop and reflect for a moment on many of the issues that dominated the news this past year, you'll realize that most if not all—dealt directly or indirectly with ethics—social justice issues, bioethics and morality. Consider the following: cloning, war, reproductive technologies, the death penalty, oppression, corporate greed, racism, poverty, human rights—and euthanasia—just to mention a few.

As Catholic educators and parents we must ask ourselves—how do we want our daughters to respond to these issues? What must we do to prepare them to deal with the world they will inherit?

The Catholic Church has a long, rich tradition, teaching morality, ethics, and social issues. The modern era in the social teaching of the Church goes back to 1891, and to an Encyclical written by Pope Leo XIII, titled **Rerum Novarum** (On the Condition of Labor). This letter primarily addressed the plight of workers in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and the deprivation of fundamental human rights and abuses many of them were subjected to. This was followed by **Quadragesimo Anno** (On the Fortieth Year), issued by Pius XI in 1931. Writing in response to the alarming concentration of wealth and power in the socio-economic realm, Pius XI called for the re-establishment of a social order based on the principle of subsidiarity. In commemorating the 40th anniversary of **Rerum Novarum**, this encyclical reaffirmed the need for a new social order grounded in justice.

Encyclical Letters followed these two—regularly—on the anniversaries of **Rerum Novarum**, with **Mater et Magistra** (Mother and Teacher), by John XXIII in 1961, and culminating with **Centesimus Annus** (On the Hundredth Year), by John Paul II. Each one of these letters addressed the particular issues of the era in which they were written.

The Encyclicals, document an overwhelming concern with fundamental human rights. It is almost uncanny to note the similarities when one compares The **United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, issued in 1948, and many Papal Encyclicals, particularly **Pacem in Terris** (Peace on Earth), issued by Pope John XXIII, shortly before his death in 1963. Both of these documents

addressed the fact that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity. As such they have the right to life, to liberty, to a just wage, to health care, to security, to free association, to protection under the law—to own property, and to freedom of expression and religion—just to name a few. And these rights are to be guaranteed regardless of a person's race, sex, national or social origin. Sadly, forty years after **Pacem in Terris**, these conditions are still not a reality.

The social teachings of the Church begin much earlier than these documents cited. The beginnings are to be found in the scriptures, beginning with the book of **Genesis**. In the creation accounts, it is affirmed that humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Thus, each person is endowed with fundamental dignity and worth.

In the Apostolic Era, the most pressing mission for the early Church was to establish a community that would reflect the teachings and ethics of Jesus Christ. From the beginning of the Church, the community understood that faith in Jesus involved an individual and social conversion.

The early teachings of the Church, particularly the works of the early Church Fathers, written in the first few centuries of Christianity, contain a goldmine of insights on ethical living. For the Fathers, economic inequality had its roots in the sin of avarice (greed) and not in natural or prevailing circumstances. They did not see poverty as a condition that was intended and hoped that it would gradually disappear as people experienced conversion. St. Ambrose stressed this point when he taught: "The Lord our God willed that this earth should be the common property of all people, and, so, He offered its produce for all to enjoy; but people's avarice distributed the right to its possessions to a few."

Georgetown Visitation has always been on the forefront of teaching ethics in a number of courses. Freshmen are introduced to basic concepts in morality and moral decision-making. Juniors study social justice and the social teaching of the Church—and explore and discuss in depth issues such as the death penalty, war, poverty, hunger, racism, oppression, and human rights, in addition to many others. Seniors engage in the study of bioethics. They study and discuss ethical theories and then move on to applied ethical issues such as abortion, reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), cloning, genetic engineering, euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, and other topics. Most of these issues were non-existent during the formative years of the many middle-aged adults who are parents to our students today. That is just one of the many reasons why it is imperative that the young women we teach be prepared to deal with these issues in an informed way, grounded in their faith and tradition.

The service program here at Visitation has grown and expanded in the last several years and offers our students rich and diverse opportunities to broaden their horizons and to directly experience applied ethics through immersion in prevailing social conditions. The liturgies and Campus Ministry activities are

further extensions of the religious education curriculum and are designed to heighten student awareness of social teachings and issues. In all the course offerings—in the service program and worship experiences—students have the opportunity to integrate the theoretical—that is—the teachings of the Church—with the experiential—the opportunity to live out the practice of those teachings. Visitation does an excellent job of practically preparing its young women to live their Catholic Christian faith in a contemporary world. Many of our graduating students go on to integrate service and the social teachings of the Church into their lives—they go on to leave their mark on the world, ultimately making a difference.