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Remember social sin?

Ken Briggs | May. 14, 2009 NCR Today

College can be a severe moral dilemma. And I'm not referring primarily to drinking and sex. Graduation is a time when grand ethical purposes are proclaimed. There are many elements in that chorus but among them are hints about what kind of standards make life worth living.

Most students arrive the first year with a general sense of right and wrong, often etched on their memories by Sunday school and catechism. It is, from what I hear, a jumble of attitudes about society and the "good" life and at least a few of the 10 Commandments.

What confronts them during their college days is the looming reality of the hard-edged world they plan to enter. Many feel pressured to conform to the ways of that world whose blatant materialism, bloodless competition and, okay, greed, make a mockery of anything they might have picked up in church. Success is measured almost entirely in secular terms.

Few students see career choices as bearing the moral consequences that they do. So at the behest of parents and professors they sail off into finance or corporate law without a qualm. I don't blame them. They have been raised in a culture where economic and professional aspiration govern personal behavior, or ethics, while the authority of religious teaching has largely crumbled and given up the fight to convince its followers that the pursuit of justice is either worth the effort or futile.

I'm thinking of a student I'll call Laurie. In another week, she will graduate with an impressive list of achievements to her credit.

Laurie was raised in an observant Catholic home. She attended private Catholic schools, including an all-girl high school. She is the picture of modest, kindness, intelligence and understanding. During college, she has been a leader in the Catholic organization on campus. She's also a member of a sorority.

Other factors enter the picture too. Her father is a prosperous executive of a drug company. He has expected Laurie to jump through high hoops. Like many of the "helicopter parent" crowd, he insisted that Laurie choose a field that had prestige and high income. Law seemed to be it. Laurie chose law.

Laurie often said she did not want to disappoint her parents by acting against their wishes. They had paid full freight for her education, she said, and she owed them compliance.

A result was that she was driven. She worked incessantly, no doubt for her own reasons but also for the goals that she hadn't exactly chosen. She skipped other activities to study for the law board exams. She was missing for long stretches as she did her thesis.

I knew her for three of those four years. She took two classes that I taught. She was likeable and a good student. Though I was aware that she was an active Catholic with a solid Catholic upbringing, nothing suggested that her

desire to succeed conflicted with any of her Catholic scruples.

Until last week when I received a request from her. Would I consider raising a grade I'd given her two years before so that she could obtain a "cum laude" designation on her diploma? Her grade point average was just under the line, she said, and I could put her over.

My answer, of course, was no, but the incident lingers as a reminder of how slippery the slope can be. The word "formation" comes to mind here. It's normally used in religious settings, but I think the world of "getting and spending" can intrude on that world and rob us of those shaky moral precepts that sound so square and foolish in the land of the slick. For many years I've seen graduates troop off to the financial service industry, the same one that has robbed us of untold sums. Their professors haven't sold them schemes for wholesale thievery; they've adapted them in small steps to the "way things are."

Judging by the easy collapse of personal ethics to the forces or money and prestige, the churches have done a poor job instilling the virtues of social sin. As Robert Bellah told us years ago, religion has become largely confined to the private realm. But the example of Laurie suggests that when the interests of the private are attached to the lures of the public, the religious content of both spheres is endangered.

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