

Examining Our Convictions: Discipleship as a Matter of Choice

by Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J.

Published in *Spirituality* from Dominican Publications
May/June 2007 issue

Everyday life and events in our Church and world raise profound challenges for our living as faithful disciples of Jesus. What does the Gospel mean for raising children in a culture of violence or caring for aging parents and grandparents? What about economic pressures, sudden sickness, or end-of-life ethics? How do we faithfully continue Jesus's mission in the midst of terrorism and war, abuse of all kinds, polarization and pain?

Our Scriptures urge us to discern what is of value and to live according to these convictions. But what *really* are our deepest values and convictions? The practice of examining one's conscience is a necessary and very helpful tradition. This article is an invitation to dig even more deeply, to examine the values and convictions that form the foundation of the conscience's decisions.

Perhaps an example can help here. When the United States responded to the attacks of 9/11 with war against Afghanistan, numerous bishops in the United States said that the war was regrettable but justified. Bishops from other countries around the world concluded that it was not a just war. How could this division be so clear? (There were, of course, exceptions.) Surely they all had prayed with the Gospels. Surely they all had studied the just war theory with its careful distinctions. Had some unexamined conviction determined (or at least colored) which way the search for truth would go? Did the judgment about this war being just or not rest on location or some form of nationalism?

These unexamined convictions actually shape the work of conscience, the search for the truth. They deserve, then, careful examination.

The thought of Karl Rahner, S.J., offers some guidance. In his *Theological Investigations XVIII*, Rahner points to what he calls "global prescientific convictions," unexamined assumptions, mostly cultural in character, that shape moral views and analyses.¹ These prejudgments mold people's moral imaginations and perceptions of basic values, sometimes making it difficult to live Gospel values. Everyone receives many messages that contradict the Gospel, from media and politics, business and families. One's vision of life and responses to world events often are based on these values rather than on the Scriptures and Christian tradition.

In other words, in some situations for some Christians, another set of values and convictions becomes more important than the Gospel. Often the individuals are not really aware of what is happening, for the values are rooted in unexamined assumptions, in what another author calls "unconsciously absorbed prejudices."ⁱⁱ

Another example from another war. As the United States prepared for the war against Iraq, Pope John Paul II was very outspoken in his opposition. In his address to the Diplomatic Corps, for example, the pope said; "War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity." Solutions in the Middle East "will never be imposed by recourse to terrorism or armed conflict, as if military victories could be the solution."ⁱⁱⁱ The Vatican urged the United Nations to work for a diplomatic resolution and to explore all possibilities for a peaceful settlement. Other Vatican officials commented that provision for preventive war is found neither in the *Catechism* nor in the United Nations Charter.

Still, polls showed that U.S. Catholics were in favor of a unilateral assault on Iraq by a margin of two to one. How is it that so many U.S. Catholics chose to follow the president rather than the Pope? Was some unexamined value at work, encouraging people to find the rhetoric of media and politicians more convincing than the Sermon on the Mount?

Long ago, Jesus and then later communities addressed the very same tensions and challenges. Jesus lived in an occupied land. There was no doubt who had the power. As a vivid reminder, the Roman fortress in Jerusalem overlooked the Temple area. The imperial buildings at Tiberias, not far from Nazareth and Capernaum, also attested to this power. The empire of Rome was a dominating presence.

Because of his profound, intimate experience of the God he called *Abba*, Jesus wanted others to know God's loving presence in their lives. He called this presence the reign of God. In word and deed, Jesus proclaimed its characteristics: compassion and forgiveness, service and nonviolence, faithful love. Jesus turned expectations upside down, declaring as blessed the people at the bottom of the power pyramid, the poor and marginalized (see Luke 6:17-49 and Matthew 5:1-7:29).

We have so long prayed about the "kingdom of God" (or more recently "reign" or "dominion") that we risk domesticating the term, reducing it to a pious concept. So, to remind us of the range of Jesus's vision, some scripture scholars have suggested an alternate translation: the empire of God. In the context of the dominating power of the empire of Rome, Jesus' life and message about the empire of God necessarily had

social, political and economic implications. His hearers, of course, recognized this immediately.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem years later, Luke emphasized the challenge of discipleship for his community. Luke's Jesus states: "If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple So, in the same way, none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all that he has" (Luke 14:25-33).

As Scripture scholar Arthur Dewey points out, the harshness of Jesus's demands bothers us, even when we remember that such language was typical of religious leaders in the ancient world. "The demand that the disciple renounce even family and friends meant that he was to make a total commitment, one that placed him outside the usual behavior and customs of society."^{iv} Jesus summoned his followers to a new and different vision of reality, one that challenged basic assumptions of everyday life. The presence of God's reign ("empire") transformed commonly accepted values. "To follow Jesus meant to live out this new understanding of God's rule."^v

Dewey concludes his reflections on this demanding passage: "For Luke, discipleship is a matter, not of habit or upbringing, but of choice [B]ehavior, relationships, hopes, and dreams are also involved in the decision. To enter into the vision of God's rule is to accept God as sovereign over all, especially over what is deepest in the heart."^{vi}

Like Jesus and Luke and his community, we too live in an empire of dominating power. Its values have seeped into our schools, churches, businesses, into our families and our own hearts. In our Baptism, however, we are called and sent out, like the early disciples, to proclaim an alternate vision: the empire of God, with its compassion and nonviolence and love, with its implications for political and economic structures. Such proclamation is and will be costly. The conflict and chaos and sheer influence of the dominating empire may tempt us to passivity, fear, cynicism, even despair.

So, like Jesus, we need to be attentive to and grateful for *Abba* God's faithful and liberating love, experienced especially in the life shared by people. Like Luke's community, we need to hear words of comfort, promise, and hope—but also of challenge.

One final example. For their final exam in one of my theology courses, I asked my students to explain and discuss the relationship of three quotations.

Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil: "When I fed the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked, 'Why are they poor?' They called me a Communist." John Kavanaugh, S.J.: "Christianity at rock bottom radically conflicts with American culture, even subverts it." Pope John Paul II: "The pillars of true peace are justice and that form of love which is forgiveness."

One of the students wrote: "Some Americans are more loyal to the values of capitalism and nationalism than they are to their religious roots. I know this because I was one of them. In high school, I would have labeled myself as a right wing conservative. After all, I opposed abortion, believed in a strong work ethic, supported the war against terrorism (after all, they *were* evil), and hard core supported Wal-Mart (after all, it *is* capitalism) I believed I was a 'true American.' But now, I wonder if I was really a 'true hypocrite.' While upholding my beliefs in capitalism and nationalism, did I abandon my Christian values?"

She goes on to describe her questioning whether her lived values (absorbed, no doubt, from family and advertising and other media) fit Jesus's teachings. In the quotations she recognized "some of the hardest teachings for Americans to put into practice." More important, the exam gave her the opportunity to examine carefully some values and convictions, and so to find words and insight as she tried to connect her religious values with her socioeconomic values.

This student's struggle is not limited to citizens of the United States. It can face many who consider themselves Christian. Authentic discipleship calls for careful reflection and critical choice. Such examination of our assumptions and convictions is essential for all of us in so many dimensions of our lives. Where in your life is your class or gender or political party more influential than the Gospel?

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Karl Rahner, S.J., *Theological Investigations Vol. XVIII*, translated by Margaret Kohl, New York: Crossroad, 1981, pp. 74-85.

ⁱⁱ Ladislav Orsy, S.J., "A Time to Ponder," *America*, Vol. 196, No. 4, February 5, 2007, p. 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Paul II, "Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Diplomatic Corps," January 13, 2003, <http://www.vatican.va>.

^{iv} Arthur J. Dewey, *The Word in Time* (revised edition), New Berlin, WI: Liturgical Publications, 1990, p. 201.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 202.