



Code of the Street

In a previous column I mentioned that I have been developing an on-line course on ethics for officers. Well, I'm delighted to report that the course was launched this semester, and twenty-one students in six countries are taking it through William & Catherine Booth College.

The course is largely case-based, which means that the readings in ethical theory are to form the background to learning by way of discussing cases that have been drawn from actual ministry experiences. One of those cases we call "code of the street," and in part it goes as follows.

"The Corps Officer has a number of street people who attend his Sunday meetings and other outreach programs. While reading the Sunday morning paper, the officer discovers that two of these street people have been arrested for the beating and burning of a third man. The victim of this crime died after a few days' hospitalization. The other two have been charged with first degree murder.

"The incident is a hot topic of discussion by those who attend the Corps. One man in particular is greatly distressed whenever it is discussed, partly due to his close friendship with the men who were arrested. The fact that this man is upset is brought to the attention of the officer by the man's landlord. The next Sunday night the landlord returns with the distraught man at the conclusion of the evening worship as the after-service meal is beginning. The landlord asks if they could speak with the Corps Officer.

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“Once they have all been seated in the office, the landlord encourages the tenant to be honest with the officer because they know him, and they know he can be relied on to keep the “code of the street” (which is not to “rat” on someone). He insists that it is safe to “spill his guts” because whatever is said will remain in the office—“He’s a priest, you know.”

“The air is filled with tension and the tenant becomes quite agitated. With a loud voice he declares that he committed a crime for which his friends are in jail. He says he’s the one who set the man on fire. He describes how he set the man’s pant leg on fire, and with a frightening demeanor explains that he has no remorse for what he did because the victim deserved it.

“The officer is shocked by what he has just heard and after a period of awkward silence the tenant calms down. So he suggests that the man start by telling his story to the police. At this, the tenant becomes enraged and leaves the office. What would it be right to the CO to do?”

Right off the bat, students say one of the issues in this case is whether the CO ought to keep or break a confidence.

“What’s the law?” they ask. Although the course is not a course in law, it’s a reasonable question since there is a Christian ethical obligation to obey the law—in a society that is generally just, at least. The basic principle of the law is that a limited privilege of confidentiality exists when a person communicates something in strict

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confidence to an ordained member of the clergy acting in his or her capacity as a spiritual advisor.

Knowing that doesn't settle the matter, however, for even if there is legal protection for the Officer if he doesn't break the man's confidence and go to the police, it doesn't settle things ethically. We want to know what ethical good is achieved by the alternatives of keeping the confidence or breaking it.

Many students have favored going to the police if the man himself won't, on the grounds that silence becomes an obstacle to justice, a value important to Christian ethics. Silence becomes a cover for sin, which Jesus said thrives in darkness (John 3).

On the other hand, the United States Supreme Court has said that "the priest-penitent privilege recognizes the human need to disclose to a spiritual counselor, in total and absolute confidence, what are believed to be flawed acts or thoughts and to receive priestly consolation and guidance in return." In other words, they have said that the law on confidentiality exists to preserve the moral values of grace and redemption, which are also important parts of Christian ethics.

And so the discussion of the Officers' dilemma goes on. For me the most glorious, Gospel-value thing about this story is that The Salvation Army is there. With minor modifications, this story actually happened. I know the Officer in question. He is trusted and respected in the core of that city where he is stationed. And this is by no means the only ethical dilemma he faced. But as tough as life could be, as fraught with conflicts that unsettle the conscience, it did not occur to him (nor does it occur to the students in the course) that the

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most ethical thing to do would be to close the Corps and save the headaches. He knows God wants him there.

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