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seeking first the kingdom, begin by considering what God wants; they try to discern what he is calling them to, not only for their own fulfillment but as service to others (see *LCL*, 113–29). Therefore, in deciding whether it is time to begin focusing your efforts, gather all the relevant information, talk the problem over with those who can help you think it through, rouse your faith, ask for the light of the Holy Spirit, consider everything prayerfully, make your judgment, and concentrate your effort or not, as seems right. That will be doing your best in every subject.

### 156: May a student cheat when a teacher plainly expects it?

I am fifteen and just beginning my last year of middle school. My problem is about cheating. We are divided into different groups for our math course. Math isn't my best subject, so I am in the bottom group. The teacher probably knows a lot of math, but he does not explain things so that we can understand them. One of the girls has an older brother who is really good at math. He does her homework for her, and all the other kids copy it. I don't want to cheat, so I haven't done that, but even though I have been spending a lot of time on homework, I'm afraid I'm not doing too well.

The first test will be in two weeks. When this teacher gives a test, he gets it started, then leaves the room and doesn't come back until near the end of the period. Also, he uses a lot of the same problems he has used before, and the answers are passed down every year. When the teacher leaves, the kids check out the problems, line up the answers to the old ones, and work on the new ones together. They get some wrong, of course, but everybody does pretty well.

The teacher must know what is going on. If I don't go along with it, I probably will fail and have to take the course over in summer school. I won't learn any more there, but I will pass. In summer school everybody passes that comes to class regularly. Maybe I should go along with the rest of the class. But I don't like doing that, because I never cheated before.

#### Analysis:

This question calls for application of norms regarding cheating, scandal, and the work of students. Cheating, properly so-called, is a form of fraud, and so is always wrong. But if the facts of this case have been stated accurately, the teacher plainly intends and invites his students to behave as they do, so that they are not really being dishonest, though he is. For two reasons, however, the questioner should not conform to the pattern set by other students. First, that is likely to lead to real cheating in other cases. Second, even if teachers behave irresponsibly, students ought to develop their talents, and so should try to obtain the best education they can. Therefore, rather than conforming to the usual practice of students in this bad situation, the questioner should do what is possible to master the material and change the situation for the better.

#### The reply could be along the following lines:

Cheating by a student in doing his or her assignments and taking tests is wrong for four reasons. It is dishonest; it is unfair to others, especially to honest

students whose work seems poorer by comparison; the bad example encourages others to cheat, not only in school but in other situations; moreover, it is a self-defeating way of evading the responsibility to learn what one needs to know and develop one's abilities.<sup>355</sup>

Students often exaggerate how badly teachers are behaving and how widespread cheating is among their fellow students. If I thought you were exaggerating, I would simply tell you: Study hard and don't cheat. However, if your account is entirely true, as I trust it is, you are right in saying this math teacher must know what is going on. In fact, he plainly expects students to deal with homework and tests in the ways you describe. That being so, the students are not deceiving him in presenting others' work as if it were their own, and so are not, strictly speaking, cheating. It is the teacher, who is only pretending to do his job, who is cheating. Moreover, you would not be unfair to your fellow students if you acted as they do.

Still, there are two reasons why you should not go along with the rest of the class in this matter.

First, even though it would not really be cheating, many of your fellow students no doubt think they are cheating. Thinking that, they mistakenly suppose cheating properly so-called is justified in this case. But if it were, it might be justifiable in other cases, and the temptation to cheat would be stronger. So, if you were to go along with the rest of the class, you would be reinforcing the temptation to cheat and contributing to real cheating by less clearheaded and conscientious students. By refusing to conform, you will bear witness to the truth that cheating is always wrong and avoid giving bad example to those all-too-ready to cheat (see *LCL*, 233).

Second, even if going along with the rest of the class would enable you to pass the course without going to summer school, you would not learn the mathematics the course is supposed to help you learn. That lack might very well handicap you in the future. In general, learning is good for you and important, because without knowledge and skills you will be unable to use the gifts God has given you, and will fall short of what he is calling you to be. As a result, you will do less interesting and rewarding work than if you were better educated, and you will be less able to contribute to others' well-being and to fulfill your responsibilities to people who will depend on you. In the present instance, moreover, learning the material of the course is especially important because you already are weak in mathematics.

I realize that failing the course is not an appealing alternative, especially because you do not expect to learn more by retaking it in summer school. You might be able to pass the course without entirely going along with the other students. Perhaps your family or some more able fellow student could help you master the material rather than simply complete the assignments. Then too, preparing for the exam by working over tests given previously and allowed by

355. Fred Schab, "Schooling without Learning: Thirty Years of Cheating in High School," *Adolescence*, 26 (1991): 839-47, reports the results of a survey of high school students regarding cheating, first taken in 1969 and repeated in 1979 and 1989. Cheating on tests and homework increased, and dishonesty was increasingly viewed as necessary. Cheating was especially common in mathematics and science courses, and motivated mainly by fear of failure.

teachers to circulate would not be cheating, and you could participate in that but avoid cooperating with what goes on during the exam itself. You also might be able to learn more in summer school than you think. I assume you would have a different teacher and time to concentrate on the one course.

Still, I think there is something more you ought to do. This teacher, who is only pretending to do his job, needs to change his ways, not only for your sake and the sake of the other students, but even for his own sake. Do what you can to bring about that change. That probably will not be easy for you, but it will be truly good for everyone concerned, including you.

Where to begin? I suggest you tell the teacher you are concerned about your progress in the course and ask him for special help. If he responds well to that request, you could tell him about other students' cheating, without naming names, and ask him to do what he can to prevent it, so that the work of students who are unwilling to cheat will not seem poor by comparison.

Frankly, though, I do not expect that this teacher will respond well. If he does not, or you decide not to talk with him, tell your parents at once exactly what has been going on and what you tried to do about it. You might show them your letter to me and my reply. You also should try to help some of your fellow students understand that they are being cheated. If they see that, you may be able to get them to talk about it with their parents. Then, all of you can ask your parents to talk over the problem with one another. I suggest that they, in turn, talk with the teacher and the person responsible for evaluating his work (probably the school's principal). In these conversations, the parents should make it clear that they want more effective teaching and properly conducted examinations, which are as necessary to evaluate the teacher's work as his students' progress. If their initial efforts do not lead to the needed reforms, the parents should not hesitate to go to the appropriate school authorities.

What if your parents are unwilling to talk with the teacher and those over him? In that case, I think you should tell someone at the school—perhaps a counselor or a good teacher—about the situation and your efforts to deal with it, and ask that person for help. If possible, get at least one, and preferably two or three, of your fellow students to join you in this appeal.

If you do not succeed in bringing about the needed changes, you still should do everything you can to learn what ought to be learned in the course. Learning is good, and you must pursue it as best you can. Teachers can and should help you, but if they do not, you still should do your best to learn. Again, you should ask your parents for help. If they cannot help you themselves, perhaps they will be able to find someone to help you understand the material well enough for you to do the work.

I know that what I am telling you may seem very hard. But you are no longer a little child, and I believe you can do what you should.