

Writer misses the point in column on abortion

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Michael Novak, one of the Catholic Church's leading neo-conservative writers, has a thoughtful op-ed piece in *The New York Times* of February 11.

He writes of the recent encounter between New York's Auxiliary Bishop Austin Vaughan and New York's Governor Mario M. Cuomo, in which the bishop warned the governor that, because of the the governor's public policy on abortion, he was on a slippery slope to hell.

Novak's essay is remarkable for the sympathetic — if also unsparing — manner in which he criticizes Governor Cuomo.

"Respect for law," Novak writes, "requires that there be a moral consensus underlying the law." (The very word "consensus" causes weeping and gnashing of teeth on the right).

"Moreover, it is the plain duty of an executive officer to uphold the law as duly

constituted legislation has defined it," he writes.

Novak then proceeds to mount a familiar criticism of the governor's position.

Even though a majority of people in the state of New York are in favor of capital punishment, Governor Cuomo courageously speaks out against it, gives reasons for his opposition, and vetoes legislation that would reinstate the practice.

Novak complains that the governor takes a different approach to abortion. Although the governor insists that he is personally opposed to abortion on moral grounds, he does not "articulate in public what it is that he finds offensive about abortion."

Novak believes that if the governor *did* articulate such a position, he could "play an important role in shaping a new, progressive moral consensus" that would expand "the boundaries of those to be included under the wing of constitutional protection."

The governor and his advisers probably know that this criticism is not going to go away, and that it cannot effectively be rebutted by an appeal to the governor's celebrated speech at the University of Notre Dame in 1984.

Although a first-rate piece of work, that speech could not cover every aspect of the abortion controversy.

One question that still needs to be addressed in some greater detail is the one raised by Novak; namely, what are the circumstances under which a public official may be obliged to speak out against a prevailing moral view in order to help form a new moral consensus on a given issue?

But Novak's op-ed piece is marred somewhat by the manner in which he introduces and frames his criticism of the governor. His opening paragraphs are in defense of Bishop Vaughan's right — and the right of other Catholics — to speak out on abortion.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Contrary to Novak's assumption, however, the bishop's critics have *not* demanded that Catholics should "keep quiet about abortion and other matters of conscience."

Bishop Vaughan was criticized not because he had spoken out on the subject of abortion, but because he had explicitly questioned the moral integrity of a public official — in itself, an act of rash judgment.

Bishop Vaughan said that Governor Cuomo was "in danger of going to hell if he dies tonight." And later, in a sermon at St. Patrick's Cathedral, he reinforced the clear implication that the governor is in the state of mortal sin: "if you commit a serious sin and die without repenting, you go to hell."

That's what offended people of good will, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, and not just the "bigots" whom Novak properly chastises.

Similarly, Austin Vaughan's fellow bishops, with few exceptions, were embarrassed (and some angered) by his jail house interview, not because he spoke out forcefully against abortion but because he crossed the line of moral and pastoral prudence in rashly judging the state of another person's soul.

Indeed, the bishops of the five Indiana dioceses — all strongly opposed to abortion — have established a public policy *against* such intemperate remarks as those attributed to Bishop Vaughan.

After a pastor in the Lafayette diocese announced in a sermon that the congregation had a murderer in its midst (he was referring to a Catholic state legislator who had voted "wrong" on an abortion bill), Bishop William Higi personally apologized to the legislator and cited the policy agreed upon by the five Indiana bishops.

It's one thing to speak out against abortion. It's another matter entirely to question a public official's moral integrity or to presume to judge the state of that official's soul.

But that's what Bishop Vaughan did in this instance, and that's why so many people were disturbed. No one, however, has questioned his or any other Catholic's right to speak out on abortion.

Unfortunately, Novak missed that important point.

Jesus shows Simon that his heart is far from God

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Simon, how did you ever manage to get Jesus to come to your house tonight for dinner?" Eli — Simon's best friend — asked.

Before Simon could answer him, Samuel, another guest said, "How could Jesus refuse? Everyone knows that Simon stocks the best wine in the region. Only a fool would refuse such hospitality?"

Simon looked amused. "I wonder if such pleasures interest Jesus. The crowds he draws are more of the common sort. If the truth be known, some of our priests at the temple put me up to the invitation. Many people are saying that Jesus is a great prophet. Some even are calling him the Messiah. As Pharisees, we should always be concerned about our laws."

"Is Jesus trying to change our laws?" Eli asked.

"Well he certainly has no regard for the laws concerning the unclean," Samuel said. "I saw Jesus touch a leper and heal him. And it was on the Sabbath, too."

"How could people think Jesus a prophet? He doesn't even come from a highly regarded family like any of us," Eli said. "I heard that his father was only a simple carpenter."

"The point is this," Simon told them. "No prophet, no matter how great, is above our religious laws."

No sooner had Simon spoken when a servant entered the lavish dining hall



followed by Jesus.

"Jesus you've come!" Simon greeted him. "Come, sit by me here at the end at the head of the table."

All during the sumptuous banquet, Simon sat poised like a cat ready to pounce on Jesus with his questions. He was just about to begin when a commotion was heard at the front door.

"Get out, your kind is not welcome here!" a servant shouted.

"I must see him!" a woman shrieked back. "I will enter and see Jesus!"

Moments later, the woman burst into the room. Simon's friends looked away with embarrassment as the woman — who was a well-known prostitute — came toward the table.

For his part, Simon watched eagerly as the woman headed for Jesus. He couldn't have planned it better himself.

The prostitute ignored everyone but Jesus. She knelt by his feet and began to weep. There was such a profusion of her tears that she washed his feet with them. When she had finished, she dried his feet with her own hair and poured expensive perfume on them.

Simon glanced at his guests knowingly. He leaned over to Eli and said quietly, "If Jesus were a prophet, he would know what kind of sinful woman this is."

"Simon, I have a question for you," Jesus looked up and said. "Two men in a certain town owed debts to a moneylender. One owed \$500; the other's debt was only \$50. Neither of them had the means to repay his debt. So the moneylender cancelled both debts. Which man will love the moneylender more?"

"I suppose the man who was forgiven the greater debt," Simon said.

"You are correct," Jesus said. "When I came into your house tonight, did you offer me water for my feet or greet me with the customary kiss? This woman has washed my feet with her own tears and hasn't stopped kissing them. You provided no olive oil for my head. She has given me costly perfume."

"This woman's great love proves that her sins are forgiven. Simon, those who think they have been forgiven little show only a little love."

Scripture reference: Luke, Chapter 7:36-50.

Stumbling block to being a complete follower of Jesus: Religion with no love.

"These people honor me with their words, but their heart is really far away from me. It is no use for them to worship me because they teach man-made rules as though they were my laws!" (Matthew 15:8-9).

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