

Knowing how to do what's right is challenge

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

We all want to *do* the right thing, but given the complex conditions and circumstances that affect most of our moral choices, we don't always know *how* to do the right thing.

Surely it is right to protect human life at every stage of development. But well-intentioned efforts on behalf of life can backfire, causing serious harm to the pro-life cause.

Surely it is right to maintain standards of decency and dignity in the matter of human sexuality. But well-meaning efforts on behalf of decency can make the situation worse, not better.

And surely it is right that the pope should appoint bishops that are faithful to the church's mission and who can inspire others to take up the challenge of pastoral

ministry. But well-motivated attempts to create such a body of religious leaders by administrative fiat can have the opposite effect.

Doing the right thing is one matter; knowing *how* to do the right thing is another matter entirely.

Take, first, the matter of abortion. Everyone in the pro-life movement wants to *do* the right thing: preserve and protect innocent human life from the moment of conception.

But it is pathetically obvious by now that many pro-life advocates haven't any idea *how* to do the right thing. Indeed, their efforts have been grievously counterproductive.

For years they have been pillorying New York's Governor Mario Cuomo, as if the cause of human life would be advanced every time Governor Cuomo is given a

good stiff verbal beating.

In fact, he has become a scapegoat to cover over the ineptitude of church leaders who, in spite of their lapel roses and magisterial muscle-flexing, have utterly failed in their efforts to persuade even their own Catholic people to stop committing the sin of abortion.

And where has all this Cuomo-bashing got us? There are as many abortions as before, and Governor Cuomo's political stature has been enhanced, not diminished.

Indeed, the Republican Party in the state of New York had to settle for its 20th choice as its candidate to run against Cuomo this November. His Republican opponent will be — of all things — a pro-choice Catholic!

And what has come of the pro-life movement's not-so-subtle support of the national Republican Party — of Ronald



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Reagan and of George Bush, in particular?

The Republican Party seems to have switched symbols from the elephant to the umbrella. The party is big enough now, President Bush and National Chairman Lee Atwater have assured us, to accommodate pro-choice candidates as well as pro-life candidates.

Even Congressman Henry Hyde, author of the famous Hyde Amendment forbidding the use of federal funds for abortions, supported a pro-choice candidate for governor in the Illinois Republican primary this year, and he will undoubtedly support the party's pro-choice candidate for U.S. Senate, Congresswoman Lynn Martin, this fall.

Given the New York Republican Party's pro-choice platform and candidates, the archbishop of New York and those who favor a confrontational approach against pro-choice politicians will undoubtedly be voting for the Conservative Party's candidates this November.

In that case, however, the gap between themselves and millions of New York Catholics who will be voting for Mario Cuomo — for the third time — will have been exposed all the more.

Meanwhile, out in San Diego there are probably a few Democrats facing uphill electoral battles this fall who are hoping for a word of condemnation from Bishop Leo Maher, whose resignation was accepted last week and whose public censure of Assemblywoman Lucy Killea secured her election to the State Senate last year in an overwhelmingly Republican district.

And what of all that righteous energy expanded in Cincinnati to prohibit the showing of the Robert Mapplethorpe photographic collection? The exhibition closed to record crowds, thanks in no small part to all the publicity generated by the local decency squad (once headed up, it should be noted, by entrepreneur Charles Keating, who is being investigated for his part in the savings and loan crisis).

And, finally, what of the recent efforts to transform the Catholic hierarchy from a body of pastorally sensitive and realistic priests to one of ideological purity and institutional loyalty?

For well over a decade — starting under Pope Paul VI — the Vatican has been appointing ultra-conservatives to vacant Dutch sees. And yet in 1988 only 12 Dutch women and 50 Dutch men entered religious life and/or the priesthood, while 898 died and 43 resigned.

Holland, once a rich source of missionaries for the rest of the world, has now begun to import religious and clergy from elsewhere. All this in spite of the new, durably right-wing composition of the Dutch hierarchy.

Doing the right thing isn't the problem. It's knowing *how* to do the right thing. That's the challenge.

Many well-meaning Catholics, including some bishops, haven't been up to it.

God remembers a forgotten son's inheritance

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Mother what is wrong?" I called out to her in the darkened room. It was the middle of the night and I could hear my mother sobbing quietly. I knew it probably had something to do with my brother Isaac. I loved Isaac, but ever since he had been born there seemed to be nothing but trouble for my mother and me.

"Go back to sleep, Ishmael," she said through her muffled sobs.

"How can I sleep when you are so upset?" I asked.

This time when my mother spoke there was anger in her voice. "Why did you have to tease Isaac?"

"Doesn't everyone tease their brothers and sisters?"

I never had any brothers or sisters before now. I was the only child of Abraham for 14 years. Until now, Sara, his other wife, had never been able to have any children. They were both 100 years old. Everyone knew that when Sara had a baby boy, it was a great blessing from God.

But I was still Abraham's son, too. As his son, someday I would be entitled to an



inheritance. Not if Sara had her way.

At dawn there was a knock at our door. "Hagar," I heard Abraham call out to my mother. She rose immediately and went outside to speak to him. When she returned, she was more upset than ever.

She held up a small skin filled with water and a bit of food. "This is all we have left in the world now besides each other."

"What does this mean?" I asked. "At Sara's urging, Abraham is sending us packing!" my mother said, her face drawn with worry.

As we headed toward the desert, I began to wonder how we would ever survive. Then I remembered that the nomads lived in the desert. They had no real home, but they wandered from place to place in search of food and water.

The sun beat down unmercifully upon us. Our food and water were gone in a short time. Had God forgotten us?

"Goodbye, Ishmael, son," my mother said when we came to a sparse bush in the desert. "I love you. Stay here."

She hugged me before going on alone for a bit further. Then, she, too, sat down by a scruffy piece of vegetation.

I began to cry when I realized that my mother had left me here alone so she wouldn't have to watch me die. There was nothing to do now but wait for the inevitable. In my weariness, I fell asleep.

"What's happened?" I asked my mother as she shook me awake.

Before she said anything, she put a full skin of water up to my parched mouth. I drank until I was refreshed.

"God has saved us," she said. "Suddenly, I looked up to see an angel standing over me in the middle of the desert. This angel showed me a well and told me a wonderful thing: 'God has promised to make you into a great nation.'"

I never saw my father again until after he died. God did provide for us for many years in the wilderness. And the promise made to my mother, Hagar, was fulfilled. I had 12 sons and was the ancestor of an entire nation — the Arab people.

Scripture reference: Genesis 21:1-21.

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