

Cardinal raises the stakes in abortion issue

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Several weeks ago in a 19,000 word article in his diocesan newspaper, New York's Cardinal John J. O'Connor broached the possibility of excommunicating Catholic politicians for "advocating legislation supporting abortion or by making public funds available for abortion."

"If such action persists," he wrote, "bishops may consider excommunication the only option."

The reference to excommunication ignited in a firestorm. The nation's leading newspapers and major television networks fastened onto the story for days.

The cardinal later insisted that he had been "misinterpreted," that he had "no intention of excommunicating anybody," and that he had "never threatened to excommunicate anybody."

That wasn't how his words had been understood by the Catholic politicians who would have been most directly affected by them. One Catholic member of Congress characterized the cardinal's threat as "mean-spirited." A Catholic governor acknowledged that the mere mention of excommunication was "profoundly disconcerting," but that the threat, intended or not, was "not going to change anything."

The whole controversy has brought a number of questions to the fore:

- Does the cardinal or any other bishop have the authority to excommunicate a Catholic politician for taking a so-called pro-choice stand on abortion?

No. Canon 1398 of the Revised Code of Canon Law states that automatic excommunication is imposed on "a person who procures a successful abortion."

Only a very loose interpretation of that canon would expand its scope to include governors, legislators and other public officials who vote for abortion funding or who sign and execute laws which provide such funding.

At most, the penalty imposed by the canon would be limited to the woman having the abortion, the physician who performs the abortion along with other medical attendants, the person (husband or friend) paying for the abortion and the owner(s) or administrators of the abortion facility.

But canonists might even challenge the length of that list. Because canon 1398 is a penal canon, the canonist would remind us, it has to be interpreted strictly, not loosely.

Canon 18 reads: "Laws which establish a penalty or restrict the free exercise of rights or which contain an exception to the

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law are subject to a strict interpretation."

- Does this mean that the cardinal or any other bishop would have no authority at all to discipline a public official on this or any other matter of public policy?

No. Canon 1399 allows for the imposition of "a just penalty" in other cases, but "only when the particular seriousness of the violation demands punishment and there is an urgent need to preclude or repair scandal."

But in such instances, excommunication would not be automatic (as it is in abortion). Canon 1425 requires a collegiate tribunal of three judges to hear the case, and grants the bishop authority to increase the number of judges to five in "more difficult cases or cases of greater importance."

But it would be practically impossible for a bishop to make a compelling argument for excommunication in the cases of the well-known Catholic politicians whom the media and the public assume to be the targets of such threats.

None of these politicians has ever attacked or belittled the church's teaching on abortion. None of them has ever openly advocated abortion. None of them has derived financial profit from the practice of abortion. None of them has procured an abortion.

This doesn't mean every Catholic politician is above criticism on the abortion issue. Even those Catholics who don't agree with the approach Cardinal O'Connor tends to follow have voiced criticisms of Catholic public figures who, having said that they are opposed to abortion, never say why they are opposed to it.

- Why does the Catholic Church single out abortion and attach its severest penalty to it?

We don't know. When the new Code of Canon Law was being fashioned (it was finally promulgated in 1983) there were canonists who urged that abortion be dropped from the list of offenses penalized by excommunication.

It's not that these canonists regarded abortion as a minor matter, but they questioned the consistency of singling out abortion as grounds for excommunication while exempting other forms of unjust killing from the church's supreme penalty.

For example, if a Catholic were to burst into an abortion clinic just after an abortion had been completed and gunned down every person in the operating room, each of the Catholic victims — the woman who had the abortion, the doctor who performed it, the medical attendants who assisted — would have died excommunicated from their church. But the assailant would not have been excommunicated.

For many people, that doesn't make sense. But it isn't the only aspect of this whole controversy that taxes the imagination.

Delilah tricks Samson into revealing power source

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

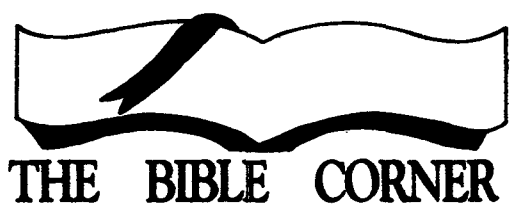
Many years ago, Samson, the strongest man in the entire world, lived in Israel. It was said that Samson's strength was more than 100 ordinary men. When he grew up, he began to single-handedly defeat the Philistines — the longtime enemies of the Israelites.

Stories about Samson's feats were known everywhere. He had killed a lion with his bare hands. Another time, Samson had tied the tails of 300 foxes together and sent them with torches through the grain fields of the Philistines to destroy all of their crops. During the war, he had slain 1,000 Philistine soldiers with the jawbone of a donkey.

For their part, the Philistines were determined to get rid of Samson. First, however, they had to discover the secret of his strength. So the rulers went to see Delilah, the woman Samson loved.

Delilah was a Philistine who cared nothing for politics. She loved Samson, but the Philistines promised to give her something that she loved more than anything else in the world: wealth.

"If you find out the secret of Samson's strength, we will each reward you handsomely," they promised.



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Delilah smiled. She was going to be a wealthy woman very soon.

"Samson dear, do you love me?" Delilah asked sweetly.

"Of course I do, don't you know that by now?" he replied.

Delilah hesitated, pretending to doubt him. "It's just that, if you really loved me..." her voice trailed off and she frowned.

"What is it, Delilah?"

"Everyone knows that you are the strongest man in the world. If you really do love me, tell me what makes you so invincible," she asked.

"If I were to be tied with seven fresh bow strings, I would become as weak as any other man," Samson told her.

As soon as Samson fell asleep, Delilah did exactly as Samson said. Then she cried, "Samson, the Philistines are here!"

Samson leaped up like a lion. He easily

broke through the strings as if they were thread.

"Why did you lie to me? You said you loved me!" Delilah sobbed.

"Alright," Samson agreed when he saw her tears. "If I were bound with ropes that had never been used before, my strength would leave me."

While Samson slept again, Delilah set herself to this task. But when she shouted, "The Philistines have come!" he snapped through the ropes effortlessly.

"You mock me!" Delilah cried. "Tell me the truth if you love me!"

"Take my long hair and weave it into the fabric on your loom. Afterwards fasten it tightly with a pin," he said.

But when Delilah had done so and shouted a warning about the Philistines for the third time, the result was no different than the other two occasions.

The next day, Delilah refused to speak to Samson. And, at last, he relented.

"When I was born, my parents dedicated me to God," Samson began. "I am a Nazirite and no razor has ever been used on my head. The secret of my strength is in my long hair."

This time Delilah was certain of success. As soon as Samson was asleep, she called the Philistines who had promised her a reward. She shaved Samson's head as they waited.

When Delilah finally finished, the Philistines jumped on Samson and he was powerless. Before they had led him away to prison in bronze shackles, they gouged out his eyes.

It gave the Philistines great pleasure to watch Samson working at the grain wheel in prison. They were so delighted that not one of them noticed that Samson's hair had started to grow again.

(To be continued next week.)

Scripture reference: Judges Chapter 16:1-22.

Meditation: At baptism, our parents dedicated us to God. Have we lived up to that promise?

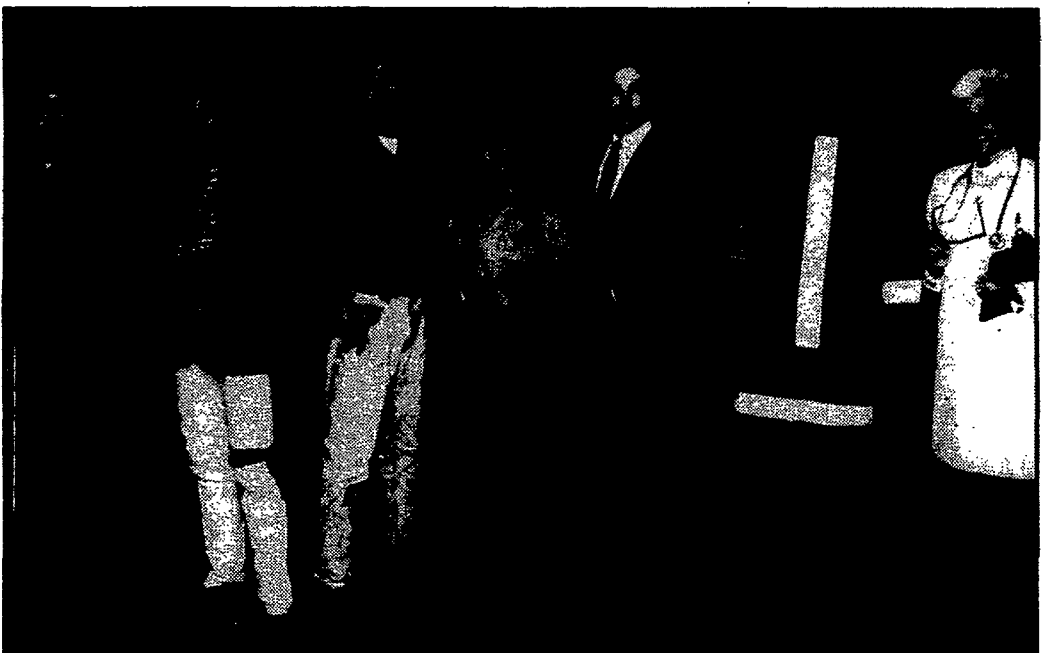


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