

# Cardinal keeps opening old wound

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated Columnist

Cardinal O'Connor declared last month that Catholic politicians risked excommunication if they persisted in supporting the legal right to abortion.

His statement caught many people by surprise. Why was the cardinal raising the stakes at this time? Was he acting on orders from the Vatican? Was this the beginning of a wholesale episcopal campaign against Catholic politicians? If so, would it lead to the exclusion of Catholics from American political life?

Just as the commentators were trying to fashion answers to such questions, the cardinal appeared to back away from his original position.

He insisted in a subsequent news conference that he had been misinterpreted, that he had no intention of excommunicating anybody, and that he had made no threat to do so.

More significantly, the cardinal acknowledged the pressure he had been under from militant pro-life Catholics.

"I've been hearing too much talk about excommunication," he told reporters, "and, to a degree, I'm trying to mute it. This isn't something that is done lightly."

Part of the purpose of his 19,000-word article on abortion, he said, was to respond to those in the pro-life movement who asked him why he has not imposed religious sanctions against Catholic politicians who support abortion rights.

The cardinal's explanation was plausible. It is no secret that, for several years now, many in the pro-life movement have been calling for the excommunication of certain Catholic politicians.

As early as June, 1984, in fact, the idea was explicitly proposed to Cardinal O'Connor — soon after his installation as the new Archbishop of New York — during a memorable televised news conference on WPIX, Channel 11, in New York.

A reporter for *The Wanderer*, a national Catholic newspaper of strongly right-of-center political and religious views, asked Archbishop O'Connor if he still had "the juridical power to excommunicate Catholic heads of state if, as in the case of Governor Cuomo, they openly support assaults on innocent human life contrary to the teaching of the church."

Instead of dismissing then and there any talk of excommunication, the archbishop dignified the question with a long and circuitous response, which said, in effect,

"I'd have to think about it."

Governor Cuomo had been watching at home with his wife and younger son.

"I felt sick," he said in an interview with *Notre Dame Magazine*. "I hoped the archbishop would say, 'That's ridiculous.' He said, 'Well, we'd have to be very careful, and we'd have to think about it, and we'd have to explore it' — which was, by acquiescence, by non-rebuttal, a kind of acceptance of the remark."

Governor Cuomo revealed in the same interview that Archbishop O'Connor telephoned him later to say that he had regretted that "it didn't come over the way he wanted it to." But in the governor's opinion, "it was too late."

Six years later the matter continues to fester, and the ambiguity and teasing nature of the cardinal's recent remarks will only ensure that it continues to fester for some time to come.

The right-to-life lobby will be satisfied with nothing less than a canonical hanging. They must realize they can't get everyone on their hit list, but they'd be satisfied, at least for now, with someone big, like Governor Mario Cuomo or Senator Edward Kennedy.

But it can't easily be pulled off. There is



no basis in the church's Code of Canon Law for the automatic excommunication of Catholic politicians on the abortion issue. It would have to go through a juridical process.

That would be messy business indeed, which even the militant pro-life bishops would probably want to avoid. The politicians, if they were willing to contest the action under church law, would have recourse to legal counsel.

An initial challenge might be raised on jurisdictional grounds. Is the governor of New York, for example, even subject to Cardinal O'Connor? The governor resides in the Diocese of Albany, not the Archdiocese of New York.

It would be better all around if those bishops who enjoy the favor of the pro-life movement would put an end once and for all to this sordid speculation about excommunication. Then we all might devote ourselves to finding more constructive and effective ways to protect the unborn.

# Samson rains down revenge on dishonorable party

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier Columnist

"I've brought you something to eat," the servant told Samson. "You're going to wear yourself out working like that."

Samson, who was now blind, groped his way from the grinding wheel to where the servant sat waiting for him.

"Is it true about your hair?" the servant asked.

"Is what true?"

"That your hair was the source of your strength and without it you're like any other man," he said.



Samson didn't answer his question at first. He wolfed down some of the food. He stood up and started to make his way back to the grinding wheel. Just before he began working again, he said, "What you have heard is true. I am nothing now."

A short time later, this same servant returned to the prison. "Samson, I have come to bring you back with me to the temple where all of the Philistines have gathered."

As he was being led there, Samson asked, "What is all of that cheering I hear?"

"The Philistine leaders have proclaimed a great day of celebration to the god, Dagon," he explained. "They are rejoicing over your defeat."

People from all over the country had come for the festivities. More than 3,000 people were at the temple. The building seemed to overflow with the crowd. Some even sat up on the roof.

When the people outside saw Samson

approaching in the distance, they began to shout, "Dagon has defeated our great enemy! He has delivered Samson into our hands!"

A huge crowd gathered and taunted, "Bring the strong man into the temple! Samson looks like a boy instead of a man!"

The servant led Samson to the middle of the temple floor inside where he was surrounded by a mob of people. They made a great sport of slapping at him while others jeered insults at him.

Samson was a pitiful sight. He couldn't even see where the next blow was coming from. The revelry continued for several hours until the people grew tired and bored with their game.

Finally, one of the Philistine leaders called for the same servant who had come with Samson. "Put the strong man over there," he said, pointing to the wall. "We'll have some more fun with him later."

As the servant led him away, Samson

said, "I am very tired. At least put me by the pillars that support the temple so I can have something to lean against."

All alone Samson prayed. "O God, I care nothing for myself. This celebration to the pagan god dishonors you. I know now that it is you who are the source of my strength. Please fill me now with your strength."

As Samson continued to pray, he began to push with all of his might on the two pillars, ready to die with the Philistines.

Both of the massive pillars gave way at the same moment. The roof of the temple caved in. The walls tumbled down. No one, including Samson, survived.

And on that single day, Samson defeated more Philistines than he had done in his entire lifetime.

Scripture reference: Judges, Chapter 16:23-31.

Meditation: "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him and I am helped." (Psalm 28:7).

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