

Bishops, not politicians, failed on abortion

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The 1990 gubernatorial and Congressional elections are over. What can we Catholics learn from them?

First, it's clear that the overwhelming majority of Americans are more concerned with taxes, Medicare benefits, drugs, the environment, the quality of presidential and Congressional leadership, and the danger of war in the Persian Gulf than they are about abortion.

The second lesson follows directly upon the first. The American electorate accords a relatively low priority to the abortion issue, not only because of the distraction of these other problems but also because the anti-abortion side hasn't made a compelling moral argument for the view that abortion is the unjust taking of a human life.

In an important speech at Georgetown University at the end of the 1984 presidential campaign, Chicago's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin insisted that abortion is a matter of public, not private, morality.

He acknowledged, however, that the claim is not self-evident. Many people in our society continue to believe that abortion is a purely private decision, to be determined by the pregnant woman in consultation with her physician.

"Obviously," Cardinal Bernardin continued, "in a religiously pluralistic society, getting consensus on what constitutes a public moral question is never easy."

He pointed out that we have to make "a rationally persuasive case" if we expect the authority of the state and civil law to be invoked on this issue.

At the time, Cardinal Bernardin sug-

gested that we had already made the case, but it is painfully clear now that he was mistaken.

We are farther removed from a consensus on the morality of abortion today than we were six years ago, and the almost total absence of the issue in the 1990 elections (in comparison with 1984, for example) underscores this sad fact.

Why have we failed?

Whatever we might think of certain Catholic politicians' executive decisions and votes on abortion-related legislation, theirs is not the primary responsibility for making the moral case against abortion.

If any group is to be charged with failure on this score, it is our Catholic bishops, not our Catholic politicians.

"The credibility of our advocacy of every unborn child's right to life," Car-



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dinal Bernardin declared in his Georgetown speech, "will be enhanced for the consistent concern for the plight of the homeless, the hungry and helpless in our nation, as well as the poor of the world."

It is the bishops themselves who have failed to press the so-called seamless garment of consistent-ethic-of-life approach. The moderates have been silent while the outspoken conservatives have pursued a one-issue course.

Cardinal Bernardin's plea, which was subsequently endorsed by the administrative board of Nation Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1987, has also fallen on deaf ears within the wider Catholic pro-life movement.

Why? Because the movement has been dominated too much by people of strongly conservative political views. The consistent-ethic-of-life approach is politically abhorrent to them, which is why it is also morally unappealing.

Many politically conservative and (often) wealthy pro-life Catholics are relieved to have the bishops focus on the abortion issue, because it keeps the hierarchy's attention off issues of economic justice on which they themselves are morally vulnerable.

A third lesson to be learned from the 1990 elections is that Americans, Catholics included, are turned off by recourse to censures and penalties.

Even if some Catholic politicians are clearly in the wrong on the abortion issue, it did more harm than good to the pro-life cause to threaten them with excommunication, or even to raise the possibility.

A fourth lesson is that inconsistency always undermines a moral argument. It doesn't take unusual powers of observation to see that leading figures in the Catholic pro-life movement are inconsistent in their criticism of politicians.

President George Bush campaigned for pro-choice Republicans all over the country this year, and Congressman Henry Hyde, author of the Hyde Amendment to ban the use of federal funds for abortion, supported pro-choice Republican candidates for governor and U.S. senator in Illinois.

If anyone has evidence that any bishop or national leader in the Catholic pro-life movement uttered a single word of public criticism of Bush or Hyde during the recent campaign, I should like to have that evidence use in a future column.

But I won't hold my breath until it arrives.

Abraham proves faith in God by offering up Issac

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Where are we going, Father?" Isaac asked me as I saddled the donkey.

The sun hadn't even risen yet. I was glad that Isaac could not see my grim expression when I answered him. "To offer a sacrifice to God."

The land of Moriah, the site of the mountain for the sacrifice, was a three-day journey. There would be plenty of time to explain — if I could only find the words. Where are you taking me, Lord?

Isaac walked with the two servants who accompanied us. My mind was so troubled. I was thankful for the solitude.

None of our neighbors had believed us when I first told them that Sara was going to have a baby. Some had even laughed at the idea of such an old woman — who was long past her childbearing years — giving birth.

But it was God who had made the promise. He told me that my descendents would



be as numerous as the stars in the sky. I put my faith in God's promise and soon Isaac was born.

Yesterday, the Lord told me to go and sacrifice my only son to him. How could his promise about my descendents come true? I had told no one, not even Sara, when I set out for the land of Moriah. On the third day of the journey, I saw the mountain looming in the distance.

"Stay here and wait for us," I told my two servants. "The boy and I will go and worship and come back."

I took the wood from the donkey and set off with my son. When we had climbed halfway up the mountain, Isaac asked, "Father, we have everything ready for our

sacrifice except the offering. Where is the lamb?"

"Don't worry, Isaac," I replied with a heart that was breaking. "God will provide it for us."

We had gone as far as possible and I still didn't have any answers. So I took the wood and began to build the altar for the sacrifice.

"Isaac, we don't always know for certain where God will lead us with our lives," I began slowly. "The important thing is to have faith and obey his commands."

I was just about to commit the unspeakable when I suddenly heard someone calling me. "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," I called back.

"Do not do anything to your son," the voice said. "You have proven to God that he is first in your life. Not even your son have you withheld from him."

I was still marveling over these words when Isaac pulled on my arm. "Father, look over there!"

We saw a ram tangled up in the bushes. Isaac and I offered it to the Lord. We praised and thanked God for all of his blessings.

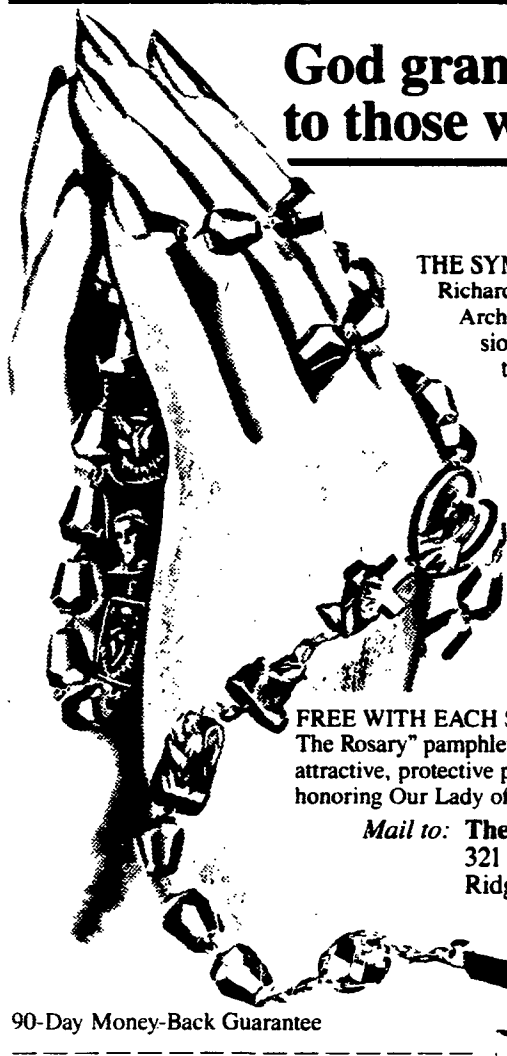
Just before we left the place, I heard a voice speak to me a second time: "Because you have done this, and not tried to withhold your only son from me, I will bless you. Your descendents will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore."

God's promises are always true. But sometimes he tests our faith to trust him during the darkest times of our lives.

Scripture reference: Genesis 15:1-6; 22:1-19.

Meditation: God loves us so much that he did not withhold his son from us. Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will have eternal life.

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