

The 'inconsistent' ethic of life

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

At least two U.S. cardinals — and many other Catholics — criticized the University of Notre Dame for conferring its 1992 Laetare Award on New York Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The senator, they charged, is pro-choice on abortion.

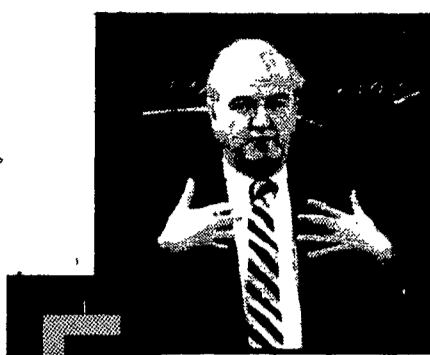
In the tight logic of the right-to-life movement, pro-choice equals pro-abortion, and pro-abortion equals pro-murder.

The problem with the reaction to the Moynihan award is its element of inconsistency.

At the same graduation exercises, May 17, President Bush delivered the commencement address and received an honorary degree. But the president is also effectively pro-choice.

During the 1990 election campaign the president supported several pro-choice Republican candidates for governor and the U.S. Senate across the country — literally from Hawaii to Rhode Island. In doing so, he was honoring the dictum of the late GOP national chairman, Lee Atwater, that the Republican Party is a "big tent" — big enough for pro-choice as well as pro-life members.

If pro-choice equals pro-abortion, President Bush is no less "soft" on abortion than Moynihan. One who claims to be for racial justice, for example, and then turns around and



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supports David Duke for high office would surely have some explaining to do.

Why then didn't their eminences also protest Notre Dame's invitation to the president of the United States to address the graduates and to receive an honorary degree?

And while they were at it, they might have added racism and militarism to their bill of particulars against the president.

The violent reaction in Los Angeles to the not-guilty verdict in the Rodney King trial reminded us once again of the raw and dangerous state of race relations in this country. It takes only one spark, one provocation to set a major city aflame.

Whatever his partisan supporters may say to the contrary, Bush's electoral victory in 1988 was due in some large part to his deft playing of the race card. The Willie Horton ad was not just about the furlough program in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; it was about the black threat to the security and well-being of frightened and resentful whites.

Sen. Jesse Helms, who supports no aspect of Catholic social teaching except abortion, won a bitter reelection campaign in North Carolina two years ago by playing the same race card.

His standard 30-second ad showed a white hand crinkling a rejection notice, with a voice-over announcing that he lost the job to a minority person because of "quotas" and affirmative action. The tactic works because racism is deeply imbedded in our national consciousness.

Under Bush's administration — just as former President Ronald Reagan's before him — effective concern for urban America and its alienated underclass was reduced almost to zero. The only cabinet official who cared, Jack Kemp, has been a near-pariah in this administration — until L.A. exploded and the president suddenly needed him.

One could also mention Bush's conduct during the Persian Gulf war early last year — a war the U.S. bishops urged him not to enter, at

least not without giving the economic sanctions a lot more time to work, and a war that Pope John Paul II condemned from the outset.

Moynihan stood with the bishops and the Holy Father on the war, and he has vigorously criticized the subtle and not-so-subtle appeals to race in political campaigns.

Therefore, if Moynihan's votes in favor of Medicaid funding of abortions are to be subject to moral censure, and if Catholic honors are to be withheld from him because of it, why isn't Bush similarly sanctioned for his overt political support of candidates who think and vote exactly like Moynihan on abortion?

And what of the president's use of military force, in the teeth of papal and episcopal opposition, and his neglect of the poor and the stirring of racial tensions?

Many conservatives who say they support the U.S. bishops' consistent ethic-of-life approach don't really mean it. When all is said and done, abortion alone determines their attitude toward public figures.

Many liberals who say they support the consistent ethic-of-life approach also don't really mean it. When all is said and done, abortion doesn't count as much as the other life issues on the list.

Consistent ethic of life means just what it says: consistent. The flap over the conferring of the Laetare Award shows us how far some of us still are from that standard.

Prayer is the 'blood in religious life'

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 17:20-26; (R1) Acts 7:55-60; (R2) Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20.

The 50 days between Easter and Pentecost constitute a simple extended celebration of the Easter event: the one mystery of Jesus' death, resurrection and exaltation.

Stephen, the first martyr, sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God to where He had ascended (Ascension Thursday). Jesus is standing, not sitting, because the church is being persecuted, and Jesus is concerned.

Saul, when persecuting the church, also saw Jesus standing. As was the case in the other readings, this passage contains the final words of Stephen: a prayer of forgiveness of enemies, like that of Jesus on the cross.

The second reading gives the final words of John in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. Final words have a smack of urgency, honesty and deep feeling.

Jesus speaks and He says, "Remember, I am coming soon to reward each as his conduct deserves."

What a consolation that must have been to the persecuted in John's day, and, in our own day, to all the oppressed, sick, diseased and needy.

Good Friday is short, but His coming is soon. And when He does, He will give life: "the tree of life," "life-giving water." "It is I, Jesus," who promises all this. With love and longing, John prayed, "Marana tha" — "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!"

The Gospel gives us Jesus' final words — His high-priestly prayer. His words are overheard by the apostles, because Jesus is speaking directly to His Father. Although He is on the brink of death, he isn't whining or asking for self-pity — only concern for the friends He's leaving behind. His voice rings with strength; His words resound with confidence, beauty and dignity.

Running through all these three readings is prayer. Stephen prays; John prays, "Marana tha;" and Jesus prays.

Have you heard the old joke about a tourist asking a New York City policeman, "Can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?" The policeman replies, "Practice, practice, practice."

And that is what it takes to obtain a good prayer life — practice, practice, practice. Best techniques do not exist on how to pray — just pray.

You want to learn a language, speak it. You want to learn how to type, do it. You want to learn golf, go out and play. You want to learn how to pray, just pray.

In his *Letters to a Doubter*, Paul Claudel says, "A person who wants to know the psychological effects of brandy will find out more by drinking three glasses than by reading all the physiological treatises on the subject in existence."

This holds for prayer. Lectures or books about prayer are not substitutes for prayer itself.

It is significant that Jesus did not have very much to say about prayer. But He certainly practiced praying. He practiced more than He preached about it. He taught His apostles only one short simple prayer: the Lord's Prayer.

He told them not to confuse length for strength. One thing He did teach them, however, was to have both confidence and perseverance in praying. He pointed out that these were two of prayer's most important elements.



WORD FOR SUNDAY

I think it was the great pianist Paderewski who said, "If I don't practice for one day, I know it. If I don't practice for two days, the critics know it. If I don't practice for three days, the public knows it."

And we might say, "If you fail to pray daily, you fail." William James, pioneer in the psychology of religion, calls prayer "the blood and the circulation of the blood in the religious life."

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