

# The decreasing respect for life

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

"Bang, bang, you're dead!" is a line out of an old-fashioned game of cops-and-robbers.

We once thought it harmless for children to play with toy guns and to aim them at one another. The "fatalities" always got up off the ground, reversed their roles, and continued the game until mother called.

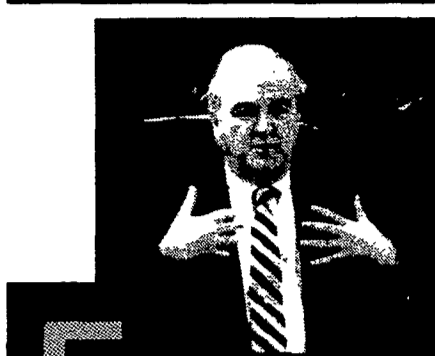
Today children use real guns and their victims don't get up and go for supper.

The decreasing respect for human life — indeed its utter cheapening — is perhaps the most depressing development of our time. The barbarism of past centuries pales in insignificance as modern technology produces more efficient and more readily available means of death and destruction.

And it is another disturbing sign of the times that our moral outrage is so often selective — conditioned by social, political, economic, racial, sexual and even religious prejudice.

Thus, white conservatives tend to think only of street crimes perpetrated by blacks and of abortion, by feminists and "killer-physicians," and not of war, capital punishment, the battering of women, racial killings, rape, political torture, or the arms trade that feeds international violence.

Liberals, on the other hand, tend to think of these things first, and less frequently of abortion, if at all,



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Each time there is an execution in one of our state prisons, two small bands keep vigil outside the walls until after the switch is pulled or the gas pellet is dropped.

If the anti-capital punishment crowd — the one with the candles — were to find itself in a similar demonstration outside an abortion clinic, they would more likely be on the pro-choice side of the street than with the pro-lifers.

And if the pro-capital punishment crowd — the ones carrying the signs with biblical quotes telling us that God wants the execution to go forward — were part of a gathering outside a besieged abortion clinic, they'd more likely be with the pro-lifers than with the pro-choicers.

Even the recent terrible violence

in Los Angeles, sparked by the outrageous jury verdict in the Rodney King trial, had a way of channeling our moral outrage in two different directions.

Who would more likely have judged the police officers guilty in that case: the white conservative or the white liberal?

And who was more likely to blame the blacks rather than the miscarriage of justice for the violence, death, and destruction that erupted after the not guilty verdict was announced: the white conservative or the white liberal?

And who was more likely to be understanding of the rage and frustration that fueled the violence without condoning it in any way: the white conservative or the white liberal?

White conservatives have their own respect-for-life agenda, and white liberals have theirs.

Thus, even though conservatives and liberals are equally appalled by the declining respect for human life, they can't seem to agree on what that means precisely, or how best to deal with it.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have pointed out a middle way that practically no one, including some of the bishops themselves, seems willing to follow. They call it the consistent ethic of life. "Seamless garment," for short.

The bishops have urged that we address all life issues together. A moral outrage that is selective, partisan and inconsistent is without

credibility. Only when it is comprehensive and even-handed can we be taken seriously as genuine defenders of human life.

White conservative pro-lifers reject the consistent ethic of life approach for two reasons, one stated and the other unstated.

The stated reason is that the consistent ethic of life approach dilutes the war against abortion by diffusing our moral energy across too broad a spectrum of issues.

The unstated reason is that emphasis on non-abortion issues, where the white conservative is often at odds with the church's social teachings, shatters the pro-lifers' claim to Catholic integrity. We discover that the liberal Catholic isn't alone in the cafeteria line.

The white liberal, on the other hand, applauds the bishops' approach because there are more liberal issues on the bishops' list than conservative issues.

But consistency, not quantity, is the name of the game. Being right on nine moral issues and wrong on abortion doesn't merit a grade of 90 and a *cum laude* degree. It's a total commitment to life, not a selective one.

The only apparent advantage the liberal has with the bishops' approach is that it only takes a change of moral perspective on one issue to fix the whole. The conservative has a lot more work to do.

In the meantime, however, the game of "bang, bang, you're dead" continues with increasing ferocity.

# Workplace full of opportunities to lie

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

"What is truth?" at work is sometimes an ambiguous question.

I, for example, publish and sell books for a living. Some of these books are better than others, yet if you were to read my company's brochures you might come to the conclusion that our products are all of the highest quality and that we only publish books that are so good you simply must buy them.

But I confess that at times we embellish our ad copy, even though the Eighth Commandment clearly states, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

We assume, of course, that people reading our promotional materials recognize them for what they are and take any exaggerations into account. A great danger, however, is apparent in this seemingly innocu-

ous practice of always putting the "best light" on our work.

When those in business, government, law, medicine, education and other professions all combine to distort or even to lie on a regular basis about their products or activities, truth in the marketplace becomes an oxymoron.

The workplace is full of opportunities to "bear false witness" against a neighbor. Office or shop gossip — especially that involving calumny and slander — is probably the most prevalent transgression. Such talk can destroy reputations, morale, even the ability of a company or firm to function.

A danger is also inherent in the entire personnel review and evaluation process, which can be done either "negatively" or "positively." A manager's negative evaluation of an employee that is not based on fact and is used to punish the per-

son for some policy disagreement or personality difference would be an example of not following the Eighth Commandment.

So would giving a worker a positive evaluation out of friendship or to avoid tension when that person's performance did not justify such reinforcement. In both cases, the lie harms two parties: the person who receives the false evaluation and the employer who bases personnel decisions on it.

Some occupations are faced with special, inherent difficulties in telling the truth. Attorneys, for example, cannot be expected to bring out the entire truth — even the incriminating part — when defending their clients. Parents must sometimes tell "white lies" to children who are not prepared for the honest answer to certain questions. Journalists must sometimes lie — or at least refuse to tell the truth — in or-



## FAITH AND WORK

der to protect sources or secrets.

Yet all people in the workplace must take the Eighth Commandment seriously if our society is to function openly and honestly.

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