Conservatives avoid Achilles' heel

By Father Richard P. McBrien Syndicated columnist

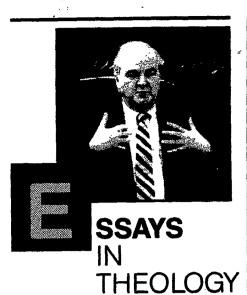
Almost 18 years ago I did a column titled, "Abortion: The Liberal's Achilles Heel" (May 23, 1975). Although I would nuance today the sharp references to "radical feminism" (at the time, I had a particular theologian in mind), I nevertheless included that essay in my recently published collection of weekly columns, Report on the Church: Catholicism After Vatican II (Harpre Collins).

I did so for several reasons, one of which was to make the point that moral consistency requires us now and again to challenge the views of friends and allies with whom we agree on most other issues.

Progressive, reform-oriented Catholics have generally been reluctant to criticize the prevailing pro-choice orthodoxy. First, because its adherents are with them on just about every other important social, political and religious issue, and, secondly, because no one likes to get into an unpleasant tussle with people who brook no opposition, and who are disposed to draw up a bill of excommunication at the slightest sign of deviation.

But there have been some commendable exceptions to the rule, such as the editors of Commonweal, America, and the National Catholic Reporter.

They may surprise those tightjawed Catholics on the right-who regard all progressive Catholics "soft" on abortion, or worse.



The point here is that while some high-profile, progressive Catholics have been willing to take on their natural allies over abortion, their counterparts on the right have shown no comparable willingness to challenge their natural allies over the social justice issue.

You can't find a word in the New Testament about abortion, but one finds passage after passage on the dangers of riches and on our obligations to the poor.

Jesus invited the rich young man to sell all that he had, give the money to the poor, and then follow him (Mk 10:21.) To become his disciple, Jesus said, one must be ready to leave everything else behind (Lk 5:11, 9:58, 14:26; Mk 2:14).

He warned that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Mk 10:25). Indeed, he directed his severest warnings against the rich (Lk 6:24).

When he described the Last Judgment, he placed at the left hand of God those ("the goats") who had turned their backs on the homeless, the imprisoned, the oppressed, and the destitute (Mt 25:31-46).

In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man — a parable much favored by Pope John Paul II in his encyclicals and speeches on social justice — the rich man is condemned for having closed his heart and his fortune to Lazarus's desperate cries for help (Lk 16:19-31).

The pope has said that the parable applies today even to nations, and he has more than once applied it to the relationship between the United States and the world's poor countries.

But how often, if at all, do conservative Catholic leaders and writers criticize their friends and allies on the right for their indifference and implicit opposition to the church's social teachings?

Can we imagine, for example, a dinner conversation at a cardinal's residence where, toward the end of the meal, His Eminence turns to his wealthy and powerful guests and says, "Bill, Peter (and whoever else), we bishops have been enormously grateful for your financial generosity to the church over the years, for your

unbending loyalty to the Holy Father, and for your staunch support of our efforts to save the lives of the unborn. It's been tremendous, really.

"But none of us is getting any younger here tonight. We've got to think about eternal life, and, frankly, I've got to think about my own spiritual responsibilities to you, my friends.

"Your riches, your possessions, your lifestyle, and, if I may say, your rather consistent opposition to meaningful governmental action to correct economic injustices and to root out poverty — these are jeopardizing your immortal souls.

"You know, I don't always agree with my friend out in Chicago, but he's absolutely right about the matter of moral consistency. Some refer to it as a seamless-garment approach.

"We conservatives can't be believed on abortion if we make all kinds of excuses for ignoring, or conveniently reinterpreting, the pope's words on social justice.

"And we can't continue this pretense that somehow the pope's latest encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, broke with every other social teaching that preceded it, or, what is worse, that it somehow repudiates the bishops' pastoral letter on the economy.

"Let's do something about this situation, my friends, and let's do it now, before it's too late for all of us. For starters, let's resolve to begin a serious discussion next time."

Sound plausible? Why not?

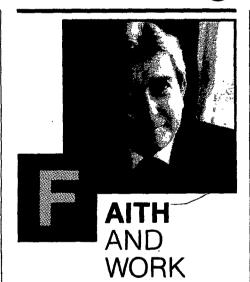
When did two wrongs start making a right?

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce Syndicated columnist

Eugene Kennedy, a noted Catholic author and college professor at Chicago's Loyola University, recently wrote a column in the Chicago Tribune that disturbed me greatly.

rus tnesis was that former President George Bush's Christmas Eve pardon of former Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger and five other participants in the Iran-Contra affair for lying to Congress was somehow justified because "the overriding moral issue is how often, how cynically, and with what degree of self-interest, Congress has lied to the American people."

Excuse me, Professor Kennedy, but



<u>RAMARAMA</u>

when did two wrongs start making a right? It is not necessary to admire all the members of Congress — past, present or future — to realize how destructive it is to society when our government's top officials lie illegally and then are pardoned by the president of the United States for doing so.

Perhaps one of the things wrong with our country is that we are too quick to excuse the stretching or breaking of the truth as "insignificant," or "politics," or "everybody does it." If lying to Congress is OK, then why isn't lying to a judge or jury? If our public pledge to tell the truth can't be trusted, then how can we possibly conduct our public business as a nation?

Perjury used to be considered

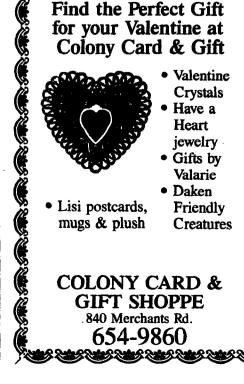
among the most heinous of crimes, for no one could ever believe a perjurer about anything ever again. "An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven," Shakespeare wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*. "Shall I lay perjury upon my soul? No, not for Venice." Today, we pay perjurers \$25,000 speaking fees to tell us how we should be conducting our national affairs.

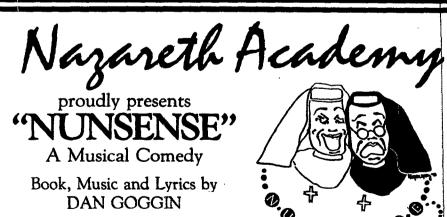
Shouldn't Christians, who follow a man who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," hold ourselves to a high moral standard when it comes to lying — especially under oath?

Professor Kennedy and President Bush may be willing to excuse Weinberger, et. al., for lying to Congress on the basis that lawmakers have lied to us. But I, for one, can't do that.



corner Maiden Lane 225-2500





Performances: February 26, 27, and

March 5, 6 • 8 p.m. Februray 28 • 2 p.m.

Ticket Prices: \$5 Senior Citizens and Under 12 • \$7 Adults
Nazareth Academy Auditorium • 1001 Lake Ave.
Order Your Tickets • (716) 458-8583