

Anti-poor rhetoric overlooks common good

By Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

Now we've heard the Fuhrman tapes.

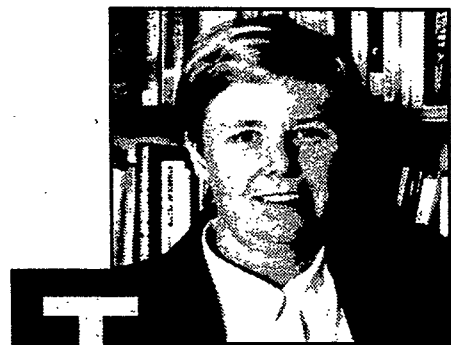
Judge Ito and the media thought society had a right to hear them, so they've been playing over our air waves for a few days.

They contain racist slurs and sexist denunciations and descriptions of behavior designed to entrap some segments of our population.

We don't all talk like Mark Fuhrman did on those tapes, of course. But hearing the tapes on our radios and TV sets seems to be part of a syndrome that is sweeping our country and making living the Christian message even more challenging than it usually is.

A climate is developing in our nation that seems to make it all right to denounce whole segments of our population. Our public rhetoric and some of our attitudes are becoming increasingly exclusive.

Lately we seem to accept language that blames the poor for being poor.



THE MORAL LIFE

We are comfortable with proposals to "keep immigrants out," to stop helping children born out of wedlock to poor women, to restrict health care to those who can afford it, to allow our government to put its own citizens to death.

We seem to be content now as a people to hoard what we have for our own use. Exclusively. Me and mine: "I've worked hard and I've earned it and I'm not about to share it. It's my own private property, absolutely. I own it, and I'll use it the way I want to."

Notions of "the common good," long prominent in Catholic social doctrine, are becoming increasingly unpopular in the tenor of U.S. society today. Convictions about government being an agent for the just distribution of social goods are fading fast. All of this flies in the face of Catholic social doctrine, of course. For decades and decades, our popes have insisted there is a "social mortgage" on private property. They have proclaimed, with the Gospels, that we all have a responsibility toward those who are in need. The popes have developed a position on the relationship between rich and poor that claims that poor people have a right to the goods of society, just as rich people do.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims that, too. According to the

Gospel, "neighbor" is not a geographical term. It is a moral term. I am obliged to meet the needs not just of my family and those who live on my street. Luke 10 indicates that our neighbor is anyone who needs us. Matthew 25 indicates that the true measure of individuals — may we suggest nations? — is how well we take care of "the least of our sisters and brothers." The American bishops confirmed this in their letter on the economy.

We all recognize a need to rethink public policy in these times. But how do we Christians respond when so much of today's public rhetoric flies in the face of what we hold at the very core of our belief system? Where has our "Christian outrage" been hiding lately?

For Catholics, at least, tolerating these recent developments means an intolerable conflict with our strong belief in the community of all, our traditional understanding of government's responsibility to act for the common good of everyone, and our attempt to secure a consistent ethic of life.

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