

We cannot judge another's guilt before God

I propose to address this week one of the least discussed moral aspects of the current crisis in Washington involving the President and others.

We begin with an unassailable fact, namely, that the President's self-admitted behavior was "objectively" sinful. Sexual activity on the part of a married person outside of marriage is adulterous, and is in violation of the Sixth Commandment.

However, if the President hadn't admitted publicly to his having "sinned," there would have been no moral basis for accusing him of having committed the "sin" of adultery, the certitudes of our self-proclaimed custodians of virtue in America notwithstanding.

But even with the President's public confession of his having "sinned," the accusation is still not justifiable. A particular behavior may be "objectively" immoral, but there can be no sin involved and certainly no "mortal" sin — unless that behavior was knowingly, deliberately, and freely committed. As the old moral textbooks used to put it, the person must have given "full consent of the will."

On the other hand, if the behavior had been, for example, wholly or even partially compulsive, the freedom of the will would have been proportionately diminished. And with the diminishment of free-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

dom, there is also a diminishment, if not a complete negation, of moral guilt.

To determine whether that is the case with the President's behavior or with anyone else's in similar circumstances would require access to another's conscience and psyche. But only God, the person involved and the person's confessor, spiritual director, doctor, or other confidant have such access. And sometimes, perhaps often, not even the person has clear access to the forces driving his or her behavior.

Therefore, even if the President has publicly accepted moral responsibility for his behavior and willingly characterized it as sinful, this is no warrant to judge him before God. The President himself may not realize the extent to which his behavior in this realm of activity is governed more by compulsion than by freedom.

Let there be no misunderstanding: I am not saying that this is, in fact, the case. I am saying only that it is a possibility that others have raised about his behavior, and not always sympathetically. But if compulsiveness is a real factor here, we have to be very careful about pronouncing a "moral" judgment about the President's state of soul.

The type of careful, analytical and casuistic reasoning that is so characteristic of the Catholic moral and pastoral tradition tends to frustrate and irritate the moral zealots who love to hurl thunderbolts of righteous indignation at types of people they don't like, and almost always with regard to sexual behavior.

Thus, gays and lesbians, adulterers, young people living together before marriage, and others like them are regular targets of moral denunciation. Rarely, if ever, however, do we hear similar denunciations directed at those we used to call the "malefactors of wealth," people who build and inflate their net worths on the backs of the poor and the powerless, or in deliberate violation or circumvention of the law.

It is significant that William Bennett's best-selling *Book of Virtues* contains no mention of the virtue of justice. For political conservatives, assistance to the poor is a matter of charity, not justice. It is something we are expected to do "out of the

goodness of our hearts," but not because we or our government have any kind of moral obligation to do so.

There are few issues on which there is greater contention or defensiveness among the more-favored classes of American society than this one touching justice. It manifests itself even among students in Catholic institutions of higher learning.

Many of those who come from the world of wealth, power and privilege are resistant to the argument that they may have no moral "right" to keep for themselves their superabundant wealth when there are others without the bare minimum for a life of human dignity.

At least two conclusions follow: (1) While we have a right to be "outraged" by the objectively immoral behavior of public officials and to act upon it, we have no right to make a moral judgment about their subjective moral guilt before God. (2) Our "outrage" should be catholic enough to cover behavior against the virtue of justice as well.

In the end, what the President's political enemies say is true. The issues surrounding the scandal in the White House are not just about sex.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Be as tenacious as the widow

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 18:1-8. (R1) Exodus 17:8-13. (R2) 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2.

The theme of Sunday's readings is persistence, perseverance, never giving up, especially when it comes to praying. Persistence is the key to effective prayer.

The widow in our Lord's parable teaches us that lesson.

Life has always been hard for women, especially in our Lord's day. Women had few legal rights, and if a woman lost her husband, and she did not have other family members to turn to for support, her plight was dire indeed. There was no welfare system, no social security and precious few ways for a woman in distress to earn a living.

In Sunday's Gospel, Jesus talked about such a woman. She was a widow, the epitome of helplessness and defenselessness, in a difficult situation over a legal matter. She needed the help of a judge. But the judge in her district "respected neither God nor man."

Justice then, as often now, was for the rich or well-connected. The widow had no money nor connections. All she could do was to keep coming back with her request.

The widow in the parable so hounded the judge that he finally gave in. Her per-



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

sistence won out.

Sometimes we characterize this persistent woman as a nagger. We portray her like the woman whose epitaph reads: "Matilda Graham has gone to rest / She now reclines on Abraham's breast / Peace at last for Matilda Graham / But not for Father Abraham."

That's not fair! A lawyer who presses the case for his client is not a nagger. We would praise him for his tenacity. This poor widow was tenacious. Her only asset was her determination. And in the end it paid off.

Our Lord's story was a parable of contrast. Jesus was saying if an unwilling, corrupt judge would give in to persistence, how much more would God, a good judge and loving Father, answer the requests of

his children! The key is persistence. "Don't give up," Jesus was saying, "God hears your prayers. He answers them in His own good time, not yours."

Ruth Stafford Peale, wife of Norman Vincent Peale, recalls that when they started their publication, *Guideposts*, they were running out of money. She said they prayed fervently. As they prayed the idea came to Norman to go to Philadelphia and explain their predicament to Howard Pew, the wealthy head of a large corporation. The Peales didn't know him well but his name kept coming to mind as they prayed.

So Norman met with Pew. Mrs. Peale said that Pew just listened to the story of *Guideposts'* troubles and offered no solutions, so Norman came home discouraged. Still they prayed. A week later, an envelope came with a check for \$5,000 in it from Howard Pew. That check saved *Guideposts*.

Mrs. Peale said, "I truly believed the Lord wanted it saved."

God always answers prayer but in his time and way. He hears us and he answers us. All we must do is not give up.

The real test of our faith comes when we have a great and urgent need, and we knock on the judge's door and no one answers. Jesus knew that. He knew that after

he left his disciples they would experience persecution, prison, even death because they followed him. But they had faith. They knew that Jesus would be there for them. They would not forever be forsaken. Those who persevered would win the crown of life. That takes a lot of faith.

Jesus wondered, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on the earth?"

Sure: In all those tenacious as the widow.

Father Shamon is the administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

- Monday, October 19
Ephesians 2:1-10; Luke 12:13-21
- Tuesday, October 20
Ephesians 2:12-22; Luke 12:35-58
- Wednesday, October 21
Ephesians 3:2-12; Luke 12:39-48
- Thursday, October 22
Ephesians 3:14-21; Luke 12:49-53
- Friday, October 23
Ephesians 4:1-6; Luke 12:54-59
- Saturday, October 24
Ephesians 4:7-16; Luke 13:1-9

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