

COLUMNISTS

Catholics refrain from judging President

Several weeks ago 160 religious scholars co-signed a "Declaration concerning Religion, Ethics, and the Crisis in the Clinton Presidency." A book of essays, pro and con, was released soon thereafter by Eerdmans Publishing Company, *Judgment Day at the White House: A Critical Declaration Exploring Moral Issues and the Political Use and Abuse of Religion*.

The declaration's endorses are drawn overwhelmingly from the conservative and evangelical wings of American Protestantism. The number of Catholic signers can be counted on one hand, and tend to be as conservative in outlook. (The full text is in the *Judgment Day* and on the Web at www.moral-crisis.org.)

One contributor to the book, Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor of philosophical theology at Yale Divinity School, explains why he did not sign the statement. In spite of some of its legitimate points, I would not have signed it either.

First, the legitimate points.

The drafters and co-signers are right to "protest the manipulation of religion and the debasing of moral language," whether in this matter or any other, and to express a certain distaste for the publicizing of the president's counseling and prayer sessions with various Protestant ministers as if "to convince the public of



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

the President's sincerity" (and to inflate the public image of the ministers as well).

One can also agree with the declaration's challenge to "the widespread assumption that forgiveness relieves a person of further responsibility and serious consequences," even if there is no evidence the assumption is "widespread."

Indeed, could anyone steeped in the Catholic moral tradition possibly disagree? Catholics are taught from childhood that the confession of sins must always include a "firm purpose of amendment," a promise to repair any damage caused by one's sins, and a willingness to do penance.

However, on this matter of presidential repentance the declaration seems to allow politics to interfere with moral analysis. It gratuitously asserts, contrary

to the public record, that the president "continues to deny any liability for the sins he has confessed."

The president has accepted moral responsibility for his behavior. He has said clearly and unequivocally that his conduct was morally wrong, and that he is determined to change and to "repair breaches of his own making."

What he has refused to do is to admit that he committed perjury in his deposition before the grand jury last August or that he obstructed justice to cover up his behavior from the special prosecutor and his political opponents.

Meanwhile, his political opponents continue to insist that it is not for his immoral behavior, but for his illegal conduct, that the president should be removed from office.

But for President Clinton's religious critics Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, the Christian Coalition, and the like and for many of his political critics as well, his sexual conduct is the paramount issue. For them, it is enough to have established that the president is a philanderer, a womanizer, and an adulterer, for which the only punishment is expulsion from office or forced resignation.

There is more than a hint of this view in this declaration as well. The president,

it says, has fallen below "a reasonable threshold of behavior beneath which our public leaders should not fall, because the moral character of our people is more important than the tenure of a particular politician or the protection of a particular political agenda."

One is led to ask if the drafters and co-signers of this declaration would apply the same test to every "public leader."

To take but one example, cited also by Professor Wolterstorff in *Judgment Day*: The chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and the president's chief prosecutor in the Senate dismissed as a "youthful indiscretion" his own five-year adulterous affair while in his early 40s. By contrast, the president has characterized his own conduct as morally wrong, not simply indiscreet.

Perhaps Catholics are less prone than many of the Protestants who drafted and signed this declaration to render judgment about the sexually immoral conduct of others, and less concerned about their being properly punished for their sins. In any case, it is not without significance that the declaration won so little Catholic support.

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

You are the light of the world

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 5:13-16. (R1) Isaiah 58:7-10. (R2) 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

Jesus defined his followers as the salt of the earth and "the light of the world." "You are the salt of the earth," Jesus told them. He did not say that someday you will be "the salt of the earth."

Likewise, he said they were "the light of the world," not that in the future they would be "the light of the world."

When Jesus told his followers that they were the salt of the earth, he was paying them a great compliment. In the ancient world salt was a valuable commodity. Workers were paid with salt. The word "salary" comes from the word "salt."

Salt was such a valuable commodity because it was used to preserve food in the days before refrigeration. It was also used as an antiseptic to clean out wounds. However, in Jesus' days salt could go bad and lose its flavor. If that happened, there was no way to restore its saltiness; it was good for nothing but to be thrown out on the road to be trodden underfoot; at least it would prevent grass growing in the road. Likewise faith that has gone by the wayside is useless.

Jesus also called his followers "the light of the world." Imagine that! Jesus



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

was saying to his motley crew of fishermen, farmers, tax collectors and housewives in a tiny and remote village in an obscure part of the world, "You are the light of the world."

Even more absurd — we, too, are the light of the world. What did he mean?

He meant first of all that we have a responsibility for the world. All a light does is shine. It doesn't exist for its own glory but to brighten up the world. All a light-house does is shine; yet it saves many a ship from floundering on the rocks. We need do no more but let the light of truth and goodness shine in a world darkened by sin and error.

When Jesus called us "lights of the world," he was saying that we have something that the world badly needs and can

find nowhere else save in our Catholic faith. The greatest heresy current today is that all religions are the same. All religions do have some element of truth, but there is only one that has all the truth and that is the one you have. It is up to us to help others find it.

Years ago three young men decided to hop a freight train on the south end of a town in the Pacific Northwest. It was supposed to be a lark on a spring evening. The train was barely moving. As the friends rode down the rails, the locomotive picked up speed. Before they knew it, they were doing about 40 mph. They had left the city. Darkness was setting in. Soon these three friends were cold, lost and scared. After half an hour or so, they decided to bail out of their boxcar. It was a rough tumble down into some bushes, but they were OK.

The problem was, they were terribly lost. It was pitch dark. Eventually, one of them saw a faint glow off in the distance. The three humiliated joyriders began walking through the woods. With each increment they traveled, the light became brighter and more distinct. There was a town out there! Soon the light became intense enough to illuminate their path. They wound up at a roadside

restaurant and called for help. These friends got home safely because they saw a distant light and walked in its glow. It became a beacon.

There are people in this world who are lost in darkness and they are looking for a light — any light — to lead them to spiritual, emotional and mental safety. How about your light? Is it shining? Can others find their way home because of you?

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

Daily Readings

Monday, February 8

Genesis 1:1-19; Mark 6:53-56

Tuesday, February 9

Genesis 1:20-2:4; Mark 7:1-13

Wednesday, February 10

Genesis 2:4-9, 15-17; Mark 7:14-23

Thursday, February 11

Genesis 2:18-25; Mark 7:24-30

Friday, February 12

Genesis 3:1-8; Mark 7:31-37

Saturday, February 13

Genesis 3:9-24; Mark 8:1-10

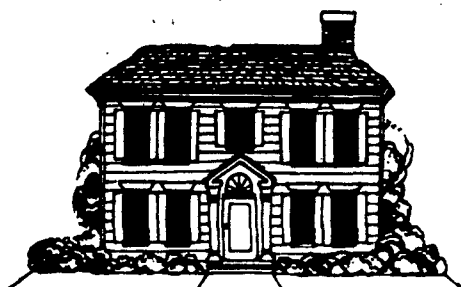
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