

# Wealthy have moral duty to assist poor

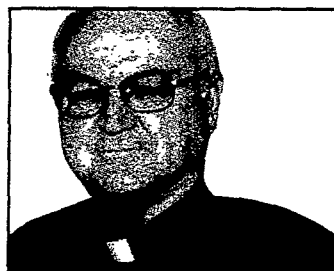
Earlier this year I was interviewed by *The New York Times* for what became a front-page story on the Catholic billionaire and founder of Domino's Pizza, Tom Monaghan, and his plans to establish a new Ave Maria University in Florida.

I took exception to Mr. Monaghan's negative assessment of existing Catholic universities, but also faulted him for allocating such a large portion of his wealth to a cause far less deserving than Catholic inner-city schools or the church's vast array of social ministry agencies serving the poor and the sick. I suggested that these latter priorities were more in keeping with the demands of the Gospel.

Some readers chastised me for presuming to tell Mr. Monaghan how he should spend his money. He earned it, they pointed out. It's his to dispose of as he chooses.

The Monaghan case came to mind during the recent flap over the gambling escapades of another Catholic multimillionaire, William Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education and drug czar, political pundit, and author of several best-selling books on virtue. Bennett was highly visible on television during the impeachment procedures against former President Clinton, excoriating Clinton's personal behavior and deploring the decline of moral outrage in American society.

Mr. Bennett, it turned out, had a slight moral problem of his own. According to



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Newsweek and *The Washington Monthly*, in the past decade he has lost more than \$8 million at various casinos in Atlantic City and Las Vegas, where he has been "a preferred customer" at several gambling establishments.

After Bennett told the magazines that he has basically broken even over the years, Jonathan Alter, *Newsweek* columnist, phoned one of the casinos to verify this claim. The party at the other end of the line simply laughed.

Bennett's considerable income and wealth are derived largely from book royalties and numerous speeches before conservative and business groups around the country — at \$50,000 an appearance. Those talks invariably focus on what Bennett perceives as a general moral decline in American society.

Under pressure of such acutely embarrassing publicity, Bennett has now sworn off gambling, conceding that he had done "too much" of it and had set a poor example. Meanwhile, a few of his conservative allies have bent over back-

wards to rationalize his behavior.

But there is an even deeper moral issue here. According to Catholic social teaching, people of means do not, in fact, have an absolute right to dispose of their income and wealth in any way they deem fit.

In his watershed 1891 encyclical, *Rerum novarum*, Pope Leo XIII declared that "when the demands of necessity and propriety have been sufficiently met, it is a duty to give to the poor out of that which remains" (n. 19). In using the word "duty," the pope made it a matter of justice, not charity.

Pope Pius XI was even more explicit in his 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo anno*, marking the 40th anniversary of *Rerum novarum*: "Furthermore, a person's superfluous income, that is, income which he does not need to sustain life fittingly and with dignity, is not left wholly to his own free determination. Rather the Sacred Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church constantly declare in the most explicit language that the rich are bound by a very great precept to practice almsgiving, beneficence, and munificence" (n. 50).

Mr. Bennett assures us that he didn't "play the milk money." Eight million dollars, however, would buy a lot of milk for a lot of hungry children.

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

## Drive forces renovations

To the editor:

I would like to express my personal feeling in regard to the latest and final plans for the renovation, modernization, if you will, of the Sacred Heart Cathedral of Rochester. Bishop Clark with his chosen architects and hand-picked renovation group is trying to (force such a project on us.) The Cathedral project total cost of \$8,000,000 will be placed via "Partners in Faith."

The renovation work is to eliminate the original physical interior, changing the characteristic of Christ's Church into a simple four-walled edifice. Our forefathers took great pride to build great churches to honor their Majestic Savior. All their elaborate, intriguing work was done with love to glorify their Catholic Faith.

The \$6,000,000 balance for the cathedral renovation is pushed to the diocese's parishes even though parishioners would be against the Sacred Heart Cathedral changes. To the religious leaders: practice what you preach! The cathedral renovation is not a top priority; this enormous expense could be used for the less fortunate people, the needy, the poor for whom we often hear in "sermons" to help.

Parish and parishioners alike do not possess gold mines. We also have our own homes and family and business expenses and we are trying to make ends meet. Will the portion of the "Partners in Faith" pie be channeled for other uses? It

was stated by the renovation committee and Bishop Clark that the Sanctuary-Altar should also be removed or changed in order to conform or match the new décor of the cathedral.

Paul Saltarello  
Beech Tree Road  
Auburn

## Words can be violent

To the editor:

For a number of years now I've read the somewhat eye-popping contributions of Mark Scibilia-Carver to this page. In his opinion Christ was a pacifist whose central message is one of non-violence.

Aside from the fact that I disagree with this interpretation of Scripture, I think Mr. Carver has a surprisingly narrow understanding of violence. Physical force is not the only way a violent spirit expresses itself. It can also be expressed through choice of words, tone of voice, gestures, demeanor, etc.

In view of this, I'd say few writers to this page have been as consistently contentious as Mr. Carver; one might even think him a tad violent-spirited.

Awhile back he wrote a rather sneering criticism of a column by Sister Pat Schoelles — with whom I, too, have points of disagreement — because, in his view, she didn't demonstrate a sufficient "Gospel perspective" in reflecting on her ambivalence regarding the death penalty.

Earlier still, Mr. Carver wrote an unusually caustic letter attacking Father Albert Shamon — than whom, judging from his writings, there are probably few souls, in my former diocese, more peaceable — because, of all things, he used military imagery in one of his columns.

Now, I'm not a pacifist; I think the use of force can be legitimate, especially in the interest of protecting the vulnerable from the predatory. And when cynicism is the only thing that will cut through the intellectual fog,

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