

This message was delivered by Bishop Robert Carlson, Roman Catholic Bishop in South Dakota on October 13, 2000 at the Annual Meeting of the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling. South Dakota voted on November 7, 2000 on a proposition removing video lottery from the state.

GAMBLING AND THE CHURCHES: SHOULD WE WORRY?

Shortly after our press conference in early September an editorial appeared in the Pierre newspaper stating: "Video lottery backers got a formidable new opponent last week with the announcement that leaders of churches representing hundreds of thousands of South Dakotan's would work for the passage of the measure that would ban the games."

It was clear, I believe, that people in South Dakota understood that we had entered the debate because we are concerned about the common good and a valued way of life here on the prairie. In the same editorial the writer went on to ask several questions that have frequently been raised and need to be addressed.

First, what right do pastor's have to address this issue from the pulpit --- isn't this mixing worship with politics? Answer: The Church has a role in the political order --- this includes education, highlighting the moral dimension of public policy, participating in the debate on matters affecting the common good and witnessing to the Gospel. And we do this each from our own faith perspective. I'm personally more involved this year because I have listened to my pastors and many other Catholics across East-River South Dakota who have seen the damage cause by video lottery.

The second point raised in the editorial was specifically addressed to Catholic pastors and I would like to share it with you:

"Catholic priests in particular must be ready to explain why state-sanctioned gaming should be banned when church-sanctioned gaming--bingo--was allowed to thrive for years."

The Catholic Church teaches that games of chance and betting as recreation and an occasional pastime are not in and of themselves evil and unjust. I realize that up to this point we might be at odds (if you pardon the pun) with a number of other faith traditions in the room.

However, this is just part of the teaching. As I continue I believe you will see the particular concern we all have with video lottery.

Gambling, however, is morally unacceptable when it goes beyond recreation and deprives people of what is necessary to provide for their needs and those under their care. Here the passion for gambling risks becoming an enslavement.

It is at this point that the Church counsels the addictive player away from gambling and even warns of the serious moral responsibility that the individual has to stop gambling.

Here the Church touches individual lives and also focuses on a particular form of gambling. As Bishop Cupich of Rapid City and I stated in our August 25th Pastoral Letter: "Many of those in favor of the November 7 amendment correctly have highlighted how video gambling is especially addictive. It entices the player with a dizzying array of lights, sounds and "continuous" winnings.

Others have convincingly argued how its widespread availability (8,000 machines in 1,400 locations) takes advantage of those prone to addiction and aims at the most desperate of our citizens."

Eight years ago Bishop Paul Dudley and I asked our Catholic parishes and fraternal groups to phase out gambling and games of chance. We felt they were charity on the cheap. It was not a good example and to a certain extent erodes our moral authority. It was to my way of thinking the right decision for our time.

I don't think the Church or for that matter the State should be encouraging gambling and the greed that it fosters. As Father Peter Daly (A priest of the Archdiocese of Washington D.C.) said, "If lotto is taxes for people who can't do math, then bingo is tithing for people who don't have faith." I think this fits with video lottery here in South Dakota.

The third issue in the editorial deals with pastors addressing this issue in a tax exempt organization knowing that (according to the editorial) it will raise taxes for all their parishioners.

Churches do not participate in the day to day life of South Dakota in a vacuum. English Common Law provides for Churches being tax exempt because of what they do to help society through their care for the poor and their works of charity. The Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls through its schools and places like the Good Shepherd Center and St. Francis House saves the State millions and millions of dollars -- about 26 million each year just for the schools! This far exceeds any property tax!!!

In addition Churches already pay sales tax and the Catholic Diocese voluntarily pays taxes for our 500 housing units for the working poor.

When the Governor says taxes will increase we are concerned, but some leaders in the Legislature tell us that the problem can be addressed. We have excellent citizen legislators in South Dakota, and I trust them when they say they will find ways to replace the revenue. Our only interest is preserving a valued way of life in South Dakota.

As New York Times columnist William Safire said, "The yen to gamble is a personal weakness, but state-sponsored gambling is a banana-republic abomination that undermines national values.

Finally, we know that with the end of video lottery that the suffering will not "magically stop"--- to respond to the final issue raised after we entered the video lottery debate. At the same time our role in society is to share the Gospel and its teachings with the people of our day. We are called to share more than spiritual milk but rather the solid spiritual food of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As individual citizens we elect all government leaders. It is our obligation and responsibility to see that they make decisions and policies that protect all the people of South Dakota and promote the common good.