

Expanding Gambling

A Needless Gamble for Pennsylvania or a Good Idea?

The current public discussion of riverboat gambling in Pennsylvania has prompted the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference to review the moral and social issues related to the topic of gambling and to offer this statement as a guide to future deliberations on this important issue.

There are two major aspects to the consideration of gambling. The first is the theological or moral aspect. From this perspective, we need to consider whether gambling is immoral in itself, or whether it is morally neutral, but easily subject to circumstances which can effectively render it immoral.

The second is the public policy and societal aspect. Here the subject becomes more complex, leading us to consider the following questions:

- Will the expansion of gambling in Pennsylvania enhance the state's revenues without adding to the state's social problems and law enforcement burdens?
- Will the state be able to regulate gambling so that organized crime will not become involved?
- Will there be appropriate limits set to protect gamblers from addiction and misuse of personal funds?

None of these questions is easy to answer and therefore each piece of proposed legislation will need to be carefully evaluated.

THEOLOGICAL AND MORAL PERSPECTIVES

We wish to clarify, first of all, that the Catholic Church, according to its traditional theology does not consider gambling to be intrinsically evil. In fact, we recognize that properly controlled, gambling can have positive aspects, such as the provision of legitimate recreation, the generation of funds for acceptable causes, and in some cases, the enhancement of local economies. There are, however, certain principles governing the intentions of the person who gambles as well as the structure of the activity itself which determine its morality in particular situations.

Traditional Catholic teaching maintains that gambling is morally acceptable when all of the following conditions are met:

- The money or possessions wagered are not needed to support one's family or to fulfill other just obligations.
- A person participates freely.
- The revenues derived from gambling are not used to support any illegal or immoral enterprise.
- The games of chance are operated fairly and every participant has an equal chance of winning or losing.

The recently published *Catechism of the Catholic Church* succinctly expresses Catholic teaching as follows:

"2413 Games of Chance (card games, etc.) or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice. They become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for

his needs and those of others. The passion for gambling risks becoming an enslavement. Unfair wages and cheating at games constitute grave matter, unless the damage inflicted is so slight that the one who suffers it cannot reasonably consider it significant."

PUBLIC POLICY AND SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVES

In sharing the Catholic theological perspective on gambling, we are also aware of and very concerned about other important and related aspects of the issue that would serve to make specific pieces of gambling legislation morally unacceptable. We believe that the promotion of the common good of society and the protection of individual rights is always to be the primary goal of public policy. Accordingly, the potential negative consequences of an expanded "culture of gambling" need to be carefully evaluated.

Since gambling is itself morally neutral, but because issues related to gambling can make it morally unacceptable, individuals who participate in gambling are obliged to make conscientious, prudential judgments about their activity. This applies as well to civil governments which sponsor gambling and to the owners of gambling establishments as it does to their patrons. For the same reasons, protective criteria must be considered in the evaluation of gambling-related legislation.

Some of these are as follows:

- The legislation should contain provisions for maintaining the moral and legal integrity of the games. Such provisions should seek to prevent the involvement of organized crime.
- There should be reasonable and enforceable safeguards in the legislation to discourage the abuse of gambling by individuals. These could include, for example, the placing of reasonable limits on the amounts which can be wagered and the imposition of restrictions on gambling credit.
- All or a significant portion of the tax revenues resulting from gambling activity should be used for programs that benefit the people of the state or those who reside in the communities where the games are operated. However, civil governments should rely on equitable tax policies and not excessively on tax revenues from gambling.
- The legislation should contain a local option provision which enables the people to decide through referendum whether gambling should be permitted in their local community.
- Prohibitions against underage gambling must be clearly stated in the legislation and such prohibitions must be strictly enforced.

Legalized gambling which is not properly regulated involves considerable risks to individuals and communities with possibly very negative consequences. For this reason, if political leaders legalize riverboat or other forms of gambling in Pennsylvania, they have the obligation to minimize the dangers by safeguards like those recommended above. Otherwise, responsible citizens and organizations should oppose an expansion of legalized gambling in our Commonwealth.

This statement and many others are also available in booklet or pamphlet form at cost plus postage/shipping. To order, call 717-238-9613 or email name, shipping and billing address, document title, and quantity to info@pacatholic.org or download an order form and price list from www.pacatholic.org to print and fax your order.