NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The Golden Age of the Casino

Ken Briggs | Jul. 5, 2011 NCR Today

On the site where thousands of Bethlehem Steel workers produced the ribs of the Empire State building and the Golden Gate bridge now stands the glittering Sands Casino.

In order to get it there, local, state and federal politicians campaigned hard to win approval, as other officials had done elsewhere in pursuit of gambling revenues. And, like other successful efforts, the Bethlehem pitch also promised the winning combination of plentiful jobs and revenues for tax starved local governments. Opponents were swatted away like pesky flies.

The media in this corner of Pennsylvania keep close tabs on the reports of the "action" from Sands; in short, it's booming, with loads of busses arriving every day to take their chances. Nearly everyone insists they only wager a small, fixed amount and most say they come out even or ahead, claims that tend to contradict the findings of those who study such matters.

Casinos have popped up all over the country as a vaguely defined hedge against higher taxes and a windfall for community welfare. The operators lend their names to a few local causes, they charm the chamber of commerce and persuade a fair number of non-gamblers that the blackjack crowd will, in effect, subsidize them without their ever lifting a finger.

That it doesn't turn out that way is obvious to anyone who bothers to check, but the mesmerizing, fanciful nature of the gambling game is enough to sustain illusions. That casinos prey upon the vulnerabilities of those who entertain delusions of grandeur with money siphoned from living expenses attracts virtually no attention from religious groups. It's all in good fun, you see, so why be a spoilsport.

Full disclosure requires me to explain that I was raised in Methodist churches where gambling was scorned as "thinking you could get something for nothing." When I was in high school, the church treasurer was caught skimming money off the weekly offering in a desperate effort to pay off her husband's gambling debt. Needless to say, that reinforced the anti-gambling sentiment.

On many issues, my ethical beliefs have shifted from those days, but not when it comes to gambling. Why anyone would voluntarily give money away to casino syndicates is understandable as a unhealthy compulsion, perhaps, but totally foolhardy as a rational exercise.

Clearly, then, the booming Sands enterprise doesn't suit my tastes or my ethics, but its part of a pattern that is still spreading like wildfire, even or especially during economic hard times. Attitudes like mine are greeted at best with polite indulgence, at worst as a remnant of the bad old Puritans. The prevailing view seems to be that it's time to lighten up and enjoy the lights and glamour that's drawing so many to the area (we don't often get to the "who benefits?" part).

I keep thinking -- wishfully thinking I guess -- that there is a casino bubble that will burst -- that the craze for easy money, for deceiving oneself into thinking that low-key greed is fun, will reach some kind of limit. But

perhaps it is in the nature of seemingly harmless or venial sins (I can see the brickbat heading my way) is that it has no limits. Every time I hear of another bold new gambling blueprint vowing to renew another community's fortunes I think maybe they've reached a saturation point that will at least halt this irresponsibility toward persons and fiscal integrity.

But it doesn't happen and maybe never will. You build them and the victims will come in droves, lured by false expectations and a climate that saps character instead of building it.

The endless string of lotteries feeds this impulse and is fed by it. I'm confident that a host of politicians who crusade against taxes have encouraged every single element of this craze; it's an imagined remedy to our budget crisis and lots of other things that not-so-slyly shifts the burden of revenue production to those who can least afford it while retaining their own privileges.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/22/2014 - 04:36*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/golden-age-casino