

Vice President's Global Forum on Fighting Corruption Feb.24-26,1999

Religious Values and the Struggle Against Corruption 2/25/99

Mr. Vice President, Judge Noonan, honorable guests and fellow clergy:

I am honored to speak here today on Religious Values and the Struggle Against Corruption. I wish to make four points today in my allotted 10-15 minutes. While I realize that this is a fair amount of time for Washingtonians who are trained to deliver the message quickly, I fear that for us clergy fifteen minutes usually constitutes just warming up! I hope that more detail will unfold as our discussion continues this afternoon. For now let me briefly tell you my first point: religious values are against corruption!

Let me detail this position from Jewish tradition. I turn first and foremost to the Torah, the Five-Books-of-Moses. There, God commands the Israelites:

Pick from each of your tribes men who are wise, discerning, and experienced and I will appoint them as your heads . . . I further charge your magistrates as follows, "Hear out your fellow men and decide justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger. You shall not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike. Fear no man, for judgment is God's." (Deut. 1:13-17)

Further on in Deuteronomy, Moses is commanded:

You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes . . . and they shall govern the people with due justice. You shall not judge unfairly, you shall show no partiality, you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just.

Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive . . . (Deut. 16:18-20)

The rabbis of the second century comment: Why does the Torah repeat itself and say "justice, justice shall you pursue?" To teach us that one must pursue justice through just means. One may not pervert justice to favor someone against the findings of the law, nor may one pervert justice even to achieve fairness.

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Having established their allegiance to the Rule of Law, the rabbis continue in their commentaries: "you shall appoint magistrates and officials" Shoftim veshotrim - these terms refer to justice officials and security officials.

And on the verse: "fear no man, for justice is God's" they comment: once you are appointed to office you no longer may be your own man - you must serve God and you must serve the people.

Now all of these commandments are very easy to recount, especially from a podium or a pulpit. I suspect that almost everyone in this conference can generally concur with the propositions laid out in these biblical commandments. We all want just officials, men and women who respect the rule of law and who serve the people - no matter which God they may serve.

But what may be easy to command in theory may be, in fact, difficult to achieve in practice. The Torah must specifically command the Israelites of old to have the same standard of justice for the stranger, a proposition which is repeated many times - no doubt due to the temptation to favor their own against the stranger. But the Israelites are reminded: "You, too, were once strangers in the land of Egypt." Hence Jews are enjoined to have "one law for the citizen and the foreigner."

But the Bible recognizes, as alas all of us here today realize, that law alone is not enough to insure against corruption. Indeed, law, transparency, a free press, even international conferences convened by the Vice President are not sufficient to prevent corrupt practice in the administration of justice. This, then, is my second point. As the Bible says it in the book of Ecclesiastes (3:16): "I also observed this under the sun: in the place of law there is corruption, in the place of justice there is evil." Or as the prophet Micah (7:3) puts it: "Their hands are open to profit from evil, the magistrate solicits bribes, the judge works for payoffs, the rich man makes his crooked plea, and they grant it!"

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Even with all the laws in the world, there will still be those open to corruption and those willing to corrupt. Throughout societies rich and poor there are those who imagine that an opportunity to govern is an opportunity to grow rich. Harder still, there are those who see the path to power as a path to get even for the injustices they have suffered. They subvert the rule of law to their own personal sense of vengeance. They abuse the rule of law for an opportunity to get back at their enemies. They confuse graft with justice, bribery with fairness. In a society they experience as fundamentally UNFAIR, they perceive no irony at perpetuating injustice to their own petty ends.

This pessimistic outlook is tempered, I believe, by an entirely different set of laws found in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:6-7) in which God commands: "Take to heart these things which I command you today. Teach them to your children. Discuss them as you sit at home and when you travel. When you lie down and when you arise."

This passage is, of course, the justly famous Shema, a Jewish declaration of our love of God. The point it makes applies to all of us here and is my third point. If we are to be successful, globally successful in suppressing corruption in government, indeed in all positions of authority - if we wish to have honest judges, fair-minded police, even-handed customs officials, treasury officers who seek benefit for all; rather than corrupt officials who see the holding of office as an opportunity for personal gain - then the law is too ungainly a tool to achieve this noble goal alone. The ideal of fairness and therefore intolerance for corruption must be a manifest part of the society at large.

Whether here or abroad, whether Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim or any other religion - the ideals of fairness and honest service must be part of the very fabric of society. These ideals must be the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink. To achieve this we must follow the commandment - not because it is God's commandment - for people of good

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will honestly disagree about just what it may be that God commands us - but we must follow the sense of this particular commandment because it serves us well as humans.

We must teach our children, discuss it at home, speak of it as we walk on our way to work, when we lie down and when we arise. "Justice, justice" cannot be a sentiment we mouth, even an ideal we legislate for, but must be a reality we live daily. We must teach our children.

We must study together, all of us, whether it is Bible - as I am wont to do in my monthly CEO study groups - or New Testament or the Quran or the Gitas or any other sacred text of our various traditions - and while I am at it, frankly even the study of Shakespeare or Norse myth or Chinese legend or even the NY Times or Washington Post will do - so long as that study leads us to discussion of what is right and moral and ethical and just. For only when we speak of justice as part of our daily round - and not marginalize it as a footnote or a conference topic - only when justice is on our lips when we lie down and when we again arise - only then will we have a chance of eliminating corruption.

The kind of study I am suggesting takes a moral dilemma and allows us to achieve moral development through debate and discussion over how we might resolve that moral dilemma. As we articulate the "Why?" behind our answers, we grow to think in moral and ethical ways. Experience of discussing other people's moral dilemmas - whether Abraham's or King Lear's or, frankly, even President Clinton's - the discussion itself and the exposure to varying points of view teaches us to make moral thinking part of our daily intellectual apparatus. The ideal outcome is that we may do moral thinking when confronted with a moral dilemma in our own lives.

To summarize thus far: One: Corruption is bad and we must legislate against it. Two: Never-the-less it persists, even with good laws. Three: We must therefore battle on the home-

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front and teach our children how to think about moral issues and develop their own internalized morality. Which brings me to my fourth and final point.

So long as corruption is seen as a means to achieving fairness in society - then corruption will persist - for it IS the ethos of the societies in which it flourishes. Only when our various societies reflect the fairness that lack of corruption implies - only then our laws and news media and transparency codes will have a chance to work to stamp out corruption. When we live a life of justice and security for all - then we may have a hope to eradicate corruption among our officers of justice and security. Otherwise the hubris of the corrupt will persist, despite the laws, despite the press, despite the good will of all the conferences in the world.

To eliminate corruption in government, we must change the ethos of society so that the will to govern is the will to serve - to serve the people, to serve the ideals of justice and security for all and, in those many places where such sovereignty is recognized, to serve God.

Earlier I quoted the prophet Micah's observations on corruption in government. It is fitting to end with Micah's (6:8) more hopeful exhortation to us: "What does God require of you? But to do justice, love fairness, and walk humbly with your God."

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## Religion Against Corruption

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What values does every major religion cherish? Trust between human beings, honesty in communication, integrity of soul. Why are these values cherished religiously? Because in a religious conception of life human beings are not predators preying on each other with the more powerful exploiting the weak but cooperators in a communal endeavor. In more specific religious traditions human beings have been created by a Creator who is good, who calls them to goodness, to live in justice and peace and friendship. Bribery distorts and destroys this kind of goodness, these cherished values.

There cannot be a bribe unless a public official betrays a trust, persuaded to act for a private purpose, seduced into subordinating the common good to personal gain.

There cannot be a bribe unless a private interest hides what it is paying and a public official hides what he is paid. Lies are the necessary envelopes of bribes.

There cannot be a bribe unless a public official is divided, half looking to the office he is supposed to perform, half looking to his own enrichment, his integrity snapped by avarice.

Breaking trust, lying to hide the breach, spoiling his integrity by yielding to greed, the corrupted public official violates the values that religion protects and fosters. The corrupted official is by definition unjust, preferring payoff-makers to those who do not pay. The corrupted official offers a parody of friendship, like a prostitute selling his favors for cash. The corrupted official in a very corrupt regime invites revolt or revolution against a government of thieves. Peace, friendship, justice – the goods promoted by religion – are all grossly harmed. And the bribegiver, the corruptor of the public official, is the cooperator in, and the joint cause of, the harm the corruption inflicts.

The terms that religious-moral traditions has used to describe the officeholder who takes bribes to perform his office are harsh. The great religious-moral poem of Europe, Dante's Divine Comedy, devotes more space in hell to the bribetakers and bribegivers, both secular and religious, than to any other species of sinner. Using metaphors that signify the spiritual state of these souls, Dante sees them as frogs operating undercover in sticky pitch. A snout shows here, a back flashes there. It is hard to see a whole man or speak face to face to these quick and evasive creatures. The tar in which they operate smears them and stains them. Sordid seekers of spoils, they are dirtied by the medium they infest. And in connection with them Dante supplies the most comprehensive possible definition

of the act of bribery: it is when "No becomes Yes for money."

The Yes purchased in this fashion is a Yes that violates integrity and truth and justice. The Yes that religion prompts is Yes to Life, a life of honest communication, of fair communal cooperation, of undivided fidelity to the trust imposed by public office.