



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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WCC STATEMENT ON THE GAMBLING REFERENDUM March 4, 1993

After careful consideration and discussion, we have decided to support the proposed constitutional amendment to limit the scope of legalized gambling in Wisconsin. We urge our fellow citizens to join us in voting "YES" on the April 6 referendum to accomplish this.

In taking this position, we do not change our traditional view that gambling is morally neutral in itself, becoming immoral or destructive only when it becomes excessive, either for a community or an individual.

Today, however, we believe the trend toward legalizing additional forms of gambling is moving our state as a community past the point of "moderation." Accordingly, our past position of neutrality on this issue should now give way to public opposition to its growth and expansion.

We are especially concerned over these developments:

The Impact of Gambling on Youth and Families. Those in our parishes and diocesan agencies who counsel families report seeing more and more gambling-related stress in those families. This experience corresponds with findings by experts in compulsive gambling behavior who note an increased incidence in this behavior among younger people. We believe that a failure to limit gambling will broaden its appeal, making its influence and attractiveness more pervasive. To the extent gambling opportunities become more numerous, they heighten financial stress on families who can ill afford the expenditure of even modest sums of money on gambling activities.

Gambling's Tendency to Encourage False Hopes for Wealth. Unlike a lottery, where people understand that millions of others compete for the prize, casino games are played by small groups--or in the case of video poker, by an individual against a machine. We are concerned that such games may be more deceptive, providing those who gamble with a false sense that their skills and lower odds will make them successful.

The Potential for Corruption. Wisconsin's current gaming activities appear free of the illicit activity that has afflicted other states with legalized gambling. However, an expansion of gambling, with a further decentralization of payout locations, seriously increases the risk of fraud. We are also troubled by the growing amount of money spent by gaming interests on lobbying and campaign finance activities. We believe a clear policy that no new forms of gambling will be allowed is the best way to put an end to the potential for abuse and to the influence such money brings to our political process.

Unreliability of Revenues. Gambling receipts tend to be unstable over time. Indeed, there has been much disappointment that the lottery credit has not been more effective at its intended goal of reducing property tax bills. We do not believe that revenues from additional games will prove to be more reliable or more effective at reducing other taxes. The public interest is better served if all citizens assume responsibility for funding those programs necessary to further the common good than by relying on people who gamble to do it for them.

The Possibility of An Increase in Compulsive Gambling. As the Governor's Task Force on Gambling suggests, casino games and video poker may be more attractive to compulsive gamblers than lotteries. We believe this possibility warrants policies which discourage or prohibit such games.

PARI-MUTUEL BETTING

Wisconsin's experience with pari-mutuel betting has led to the development of only a small number of dog racing tracks, some of which are facing financial difficulties. We believe this suggests that the limited demand for such activity is being met, and we take no position as to whether this form of gambling should remain legal.

We are opposed, however, to the introduction of other gambling opportunities at existing tracks. Permitting other gaming activities at the tracks would, in our view, break faith with the voters who endorsed only racing activities when they approved the referendum which authorized pari-mutuel betting.

CHURCH-SPONSORED BINGO AND RAFFLES

We acknowledge that the existence of church-sponsored bingo and raffles will lead some to question our motives and credibility on these issues. We believe it is important to note, however, that this position does not hinder high stakes bingo games that present the most direct competition to parish bingo events.

At the same time, we affirm the efforts of pastors and others who encourage parishes and church agencies to end their sponsorship of such events in favor of other social events and sources of revenue. We strongly urge that these efforts continue.

GAMBLING BY NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES IN WISCONSIN

We want to make it clear that our views as citizens on the referendum and these issues do not interfere with the sovereignty of Wisconsin's tribes, all of whom engage in gambling activities pursuant to negotiated compacts under federal law. We also emphasize that passage of the referendum will not interfere with those gaming activities until the compacts expire and perhaps not even then.

As for the future of tribal-sponsored gambling, we take note of the considerable benefits which have accrued to the tribes from gaming revenues. As we encourage efforts of our own parishes and leaders to replace bingo and raffles with other revenue sources, we also invite tribal leaders to seek ways in which gaming revenues can be used to stimulate economic growth.

Should the courts rule that tribal gaming activities may be curtailed after the current compacts expire, we believe policy makers may consider extending the compacts for a specified period to permit other economic growth to take place if an extension is necessary to sustain a tribe's financial security.

CONCLUSION

Through the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, we have tried to make a constructive contribution to policy debates on sensitive issues. We believe this statement and these recommendations constitute another such contribution. We urge Catholics and all citizens to consider our views as they form their own consciences on the proposed amendment and other matters pertaining to gambling in our state.

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland, Archdiocese of Milwaukee
Bishop Robert J. Banks, Diocese of Green Bay
Bishop John J. Paul, Diocese of La Crosse
Bishop George O. Wirz, Diocese of Madison
Bishop Raphael M. Fliss, Diocese of Superior