

Bishop O'Malley offered the following statement in response to a renewed proposal for the establishment of casino gambling in southeastern Massachusetts. It was published in The Standard-Times (daily newspaper of Greater New Bedford) on Sunday, August 12, 2001.

A Response to the Proposal for Casino Gambling
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For some Christian Churches, gambling is always seen as a moral evil. The stance of the Catholic Church on gambling is more nuanced. We believe that gambling can be a legitimate recreation, but like drinking, gambling needs to be monitored and regulated. Although parish Bingo has provided helpful revenues to our Catholic Schools, and in most cases is a legitimate form of recreation and socialization, I would rather have all gambling outlawed rather than see casino gambling come into our community.

Senator Paul Simon gave a report to Congress in 1995 on the "Explosive Growth of Gambling in the U.S." in which he states that in 1974 \$17 billion was legally waged; in 1995 it was over \$500 billion. Naturally those who are making all this money will be strong advocates of legalized gambling and try to convince us of the many economic advantages of having a casino in our backyard.

When gambling was introduced into Atlantic City, progressive thinking businessmen backed the initiative only to regret it later when they discovered that the casinos cannibalized local businesses. One of the people who worked hard to bring in gambling, Joseph Napolitan, later regretted what he called, "his worst mistake." He explains: "We assumed that casinos would create new jobs, revitalize the city, and restore its economic strength. Instead, within three years the crime rate tripled. Forty percent of the restaurants closed. The number of homeless people increased by 2,000 percent. Property values dropped...an unseemly number of teenagers became gambling addicts. Prostitution was rampant."

The experience in other parts of the country has been equally disconcerting. The *Charlotte Observer* stated on July 1, 1997: "Gamblers who dream of "Easy Street" are increasingly finding themselves at another address: Bankruptcy Court. In a recent study of eight cities with casinos, in seven of them bankruptcy was up 50%." Thus, gambling becomes a scourge, not only for the gambler, but also for any creditors who have extended goods or services to the gambler.

There is no doubt that gambling victimizes the poor. The poorest citizens spend the largest percentage of their income on gambling. Those who can least afford it gamble the most. Both private and public gambling concerns target in their advertising at the low income, elderly, and minority population

Gambling addiction is growing fast in the United States due to the expansion of casinos. The closer the casino, the more people became addicted to gambling. Some people claim that one third of the gamblers in Foxwood are from the Bay State; and, therefore, we should put a Casino on the "South Coast." To me, the figures indicate that the Casino should be further away. (Even Nantucket might be too close.) We must be suspicious of those who want to put casinos in the most economically depressed areas where people are most vulnerable to the gambling syndrome. The high sales of lottery tickets in Brockton, Fall River and New Bedford is already another tax on those who can least afford it.

The most prone to this addiction are low-income people who turn to gambling as an escape from the throes of poverty. In a seminar on addictions sponsored by the National Catholic Bioethics Center a number of the speakers called gambling “the worst addiction.” One survey has shown that 22% of the compulsive gamblers divorced because of gambling, 49% stole from work to pay gambling debts, 23% became alcoholics, 26% had compulsive eating disorders, and 63% said that they had thought of suicide and 79% said they wanted to die.

Treatment for compulsive gambling is not readily available, and only rarely covered by health insurance. On the contrary, the government spends enormous sums of money to encourage people to gamble. If the State had billboards promoting whiskey and tobacco, there would be an outcry from the public. In some places, the government itself has become a gambling junkie dependent on the revenues for its spending. It is a government addiction, supported in part by individuals who are addicted to gambling. There has to be a healthier way to run our governments.

I am concerned that the community’s reliance on gambling might continue to escalate. Casino gambling would bring gambling to a new level. Our heightened awareness of the scourge of compulsive gambling demands that we scrutinize the new proposals. Gambling by the poor often surpasses “legitimate recreation” and deprives families of needed resources. The State is spending millions of dollars in advertising to promote gambling, and the media regularly describes the high cash prizes and rags-to-riches winners. This promotes the fantasies associated with gambling. What is particularly disturbing is that the gambling panacea is having a profound effect on many young people who are becoming more involved in gambling, and at an earlier age. The need for instant gratification and the fantasy of easy money will not form responsible citizens or a healthy community.

We all want what is best for our people and there can be legitimate differences of opinion. I simply wish to urge caution lest we open the doors of our cities to what will be a “Trojan Horse” that might contain many unpleasant surprises and unwanted baggage.

Let’s not take this gamble. The stakes are too high.