

PLAIN BUT FANCY SPEAKING

This month is the anniversary of the United Nations, born here in San Francisco. There hasn't been much plain speaking in that body in recent years. Nor have American public officials been noted for elegant speaking anywhere in recent years.

For both those reasons, Michael Novak's maiden speeches before the UN Commission on Human Rights deserve some special attention. But there's another reason: the press paid little attention to those speeches, and too few people have had a chance to enjoy them.

Michael Novak, a Catholic religious and political writer, was appointed by President Reagan as the U.S. representative to the 37th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, meeting in Geneva early this year. He listened to members of the Commission spend a good part of their time, as usual, making obligatory attacks on Israel. He then rose to make his first speech, featuring these remarks:

"My earliest memories are of newsreels showing endless bombings, endless columns of refugees, and, by the end, the endlessly sad faces and gaunt bodies of those liberated from the death camps; the stacks of corpses; the mass burial sites; the chimneys of cremation ... Our work here flows from their interrupted lives. The Declaration of Human Rights is a memorial to their sacrifice. Our work is an attempt to draw some small good from so much evil.

"Yet," Novak continued to a stunned audience, "in my first days within this Commission, imagine my shock when I heard, as I did hear in this room, so much hatred, so many lies, such squalid racism, such despicable anti-semitism -- all in the sacred name of human rights."

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"I have heard in this chamber," he said, "attacks upon 'zionism' in accents of a murderous hatred not heard since the days of the Nazis. It is as though this chamber has retrogressed by forty years -- as though this is, not 1981, but 1941, and not in Geneva, but along the Hitler-Stalin axis."

Novak then asked: "When some of my distinguished colleagues attempt to portray Israel as a land without human rights, we must ask them, compared to what? Few nations have developed institutions, or can exhibit to the public eye a record of humane practice as highly developed as those of Israel ... We (Americans) admire Israel profoundly, Mr. Chairman. Her destiny and ours -- let the world note -- are irretrievably joined. We share the same vision of human rights on which the traditions of this Commission are based."

The Arab delegates walked out, insulted. But, indeed, it is rather ludicrous for most of those Arab nations to be sitting on a Human Rights Commission in the first place -- much less criticizing Israel while they do so.

Of course, the same irony exists with respect to many of the non-Arab nations sitting on that Commission. We are faced again with the selective invocation of "human rights" to suit political purposes. We have recently seen political excitement in the UN -- and in San Francisco -- on violations of human rights in South Africa and El Salvador. The two cases may differ somewhat: apartheid being a vicious government policy in South Africa, while the current Salvadoran government may be partly a victim itself -- but concern with the violation of human rights in both countries is well placed.

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But who says anything, in the U.S. or in UN circles, about the brutal state of human rights for women and others in Saudi Arabia, or in Syria, Iraq, Iran or Jordan? Who has talked about what has happened to the Christians in Lebanon -- or in Egypt for that matter? Let's not even mention the Soviet Union, whose violations of human rights exceed them all.

So, it is refreshing to hear Michael Novak's words to a UN assembly comprising many delegates from such nations: "Human rights are not words. They are realized not merely by empty shells of institutions. They are made real by active, free, organized and competitive interests under due process. Anyone in the world can utter the words 'human rights.' Anyone may claim to justify most hideous aggression by mouthing noble words. Villains seldom claim to be villains. They invariably claim to be idealists."

Novak's pass at diplomatic reconciliation, in the final paragraph of his maiden speech, was delightful. "My delegation is delighted to work with you in this assembly, depressingly ugly as its proceedings often seem. We well know that pearls come from oysters, silk from worms, butterflies from caterpillars -- and great human vision from poor human clay."

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