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The bollard steel border fence splits the U.S. from Mexico in this view west of central Nogales, Arizona, Feb. 19. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)



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What has the Roman Catholic Church learned in the year since Donald Trump's surprise victory in last year's presidential election? Or, perhaps the better question is: What should the Catholic Church have learned this year? These are the final questions I pose in NCR's weeklong election anniversary series.

A Nation Under Trump

As the anniversary of Donald Trump's election as president of the United States approached, the NCR staff wondered if the calls to action that persisted immediately following the election remained as urgent. We identified several policy issues to explore and asked NCR reporters to interview key players about what has transpired since Nov. 8, 2016. The entire series can be found here.

It is a commonplace to note that the Catholic Church in this country is polarized. There was an entire conference on the subject of polarization in which I participated, at the University of Notre Dame, which resulted in the book *Polarization in the US Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal*. The sources of polarization discussed at that conference were largely ecclesial: Some prefer traditional modes of worship, some invoke "the spirit of Vatican II," some want the church to be more welcoming of LGBT Catholics while others think same-sex marriage is the sure sign of a dying Christian culture, and so on.

All of the contributions at the conference were excellent, but one has taken on greater significance for me in the past year of Trump: Professor Nichole Flores' presentation "When Discourse Breaks Down: Race and Aesthetic Solidarity in the U.S. Catholic Church." As I listened to Flores deliver her talk back in 2015, I found it interesting and provocative, but now I realize that the issue of race cuts through our society and our church in ways I had hoped were behind us.

Like many Americans, I hoped we had crossed a frontier with the election of our first black president. Yes, there were still too many incidents in which young black males were victims of violence at the hands of police, and, yes, the income differences between races remained persistent and wrong, but I did not see race as the motivating driver of politics that it had been in, say, the 1950s and 1960s. I was wrong.

We have learned, as a church, that racism still has the power to drive a political narrative, an ugly narrative to be sure, and one the finds a home in the hearts of too many Catholics. Even if we stipulate that many white Catholics do not warm to the president's stoking of racial animus, too many American Catholics are prepared to overlook or dismiss the racism Trump espouses. Too many Catholics do not see racism for the sin that it is, nor care to examine the evil effects of that sin.

The pattern is obvious: Whenever Trump feels he needs a boost, he returns to the alt-right, white-nationalist themes that rile up his base. That is his core comfort zone because it animates his most devoted supporters. And many of those supporters are Catholics. At a time when our wonderful pope calls us continually to an inclusive vision of the church and of society, we have a president who has built his political strength on divisiveness and exclusion.



Cardinal Donald Wuerl distributes Communion to a World Youth Day Unite participant at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington July 22. (CNS/Courtesy of Archdiocese of Washington/Daphne Stubbolo)

The teaching of the church is clear: "Racism is defined as a sin because it offends God by a denial of the goodness of creation," wrote Washington's Cardinal Donald Wuerl in his recent pastoral letter. "It is a sin against our neighbor, particularly when it is manifested in support of systemic social, economic and political structures of sin. It is also a sin against the unity of the Body of Christ by undermining that solidarity by personal sins of prejudice, discrimination and violence."

The cardinal cited a variety of previous church documents and, of course, the opening words of the Scripture in the Book of Genesis, which clearly demonstrate the brotherhood of the entire human race rooted in the common fatherhood of God. The teaching is not new, yet the sin of racism perdures.

The bishops have formed an ad hoc committee to address the issue of racism. I do not know what they will come up with. But from too few pulpits do we hear sermons about racism. How many times did we receive bulletin inserts about the Health and Human Services contraception mandate but none on racism?

Many bishops of the United States went to the border when Pope Francis came to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, in February 2016: How many returned to their dioceses and denounced what was Trump's signature call to "build a wall" at his rallies?

How many times must we tune in to EWTN and see Sebastian Gorka, the former White House adviser who may even be to the right of his mentor Steve Bannon, endorse the president's anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim hatreds?

We have also learned that it is not enough to support a candidate because he professes to be opposed to abortion. Some of us knew that before Trump became president, but surely now it is obvious to all but the most willfully blind. Indeed, the pro-life cause, like the concern for religious liberty, will emerge bruised and battered from its having been associated with this man.

It is incumbent upon those who truly care about the cause of the unborn to recognize that now is the time to embrace a consistent-ethic-of-life approach. This approach, perforce, would distance itself from the president who flirts with the prospect of nuclear war, denies the obvious fact that climate change is imperiling human life already, and came within a whisker of denying health insurance coverage to millions of fellow citizens with obvious and negative implications for the dignity of human life.

The church has learned that it must find its voice and defend our immigrant families. Last year, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops set up a task force on immigration and we have heard precious little from it. Yes, the bishops have issued some strong statements, but it is past time to be taking more drastic measures. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. did not limit the scope of his political activity to the issuing of statements.

Our bishops are acutely aware of their diminished moral authority in the public square, mostly due to their mishandling of the clergy sex abuse scandal. But they can begin to reclaim their moral stature if they are willing to engage in civil disobedience on behalf of our immigrant brothers and sisters. They worry, rightly, that they not engender false hope by declaring their churches sanctuaries, but they should take the risk if those seeking sanctuary are willing to take the risk: Would the federal government really storm a Catholic church to arrest immigrants?

We have learned that, in the pressing issue of climate change and the needed action to save our common home, our nation is likely to lose four precious years, years that we might not have to lose. The polar ice caps will continue to melt. The sea levels will continue to rise and the seas themselves will continue to warm, resulting in stronger hurricanes and more severe weather events. Fossil fuel emissions will continue to poison the atmosphere. Biodiversity will be ignored by the federal government.

The pope's call to face this issue was lost on Trump. At a time when true political leadership would be galvanizing the country for the kind of mobilization the country undertook after Pearl Harbor, the president instead chooses to ignore the gravest threat to the planet short of nuclear war. If our bishops and other religious leaders do not stand up and do what they can, by word and deed, at the state and local level, and within their own organizations and properties, who will?

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We now know the prospect of a nuclear war is closer than we have thought at any time since 1962. The memory of the bishops' groundbreaking pastoral letter "The Challenge of Peace," is just a memory. Almost no one — except the pope! — questions the arms manufacturing business, which Trump touted in Japan, seeing

the recent North Korean missile test over Japan as a chance to make a sales pitch, not as a demonstration of Japan's greatest fears.

The president is a man with no moral compass. We knew that a year ago when he won the presidency. But what has become more and more obvious is that there is a moral vacuum at the heart of our society today, not just on this issue or that but systemically. Many of us disagreed with some of the moral conclusions of previous presidents, but we did not have to contend with a complete lack of a moral framework in the most visible and consequential leader in our polity.

The leaders of our church will meet in Baltimore next week. I wonder if they will even discuss the moral crisis the nation faces on account of the Trump presidency. I am not holding my breath. The church has much more to learn.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest! Sign up to receive free newsletters, and we will notify you when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.

This story appears in the **A Nation Under Trump** feature series. View the full series .