Opinion

News



U.S. President Donald Trump gives the keynote address at the Susan B. Anthony List 11th Annual Campaign for Life Gala May 22 at the National Building Museum in Washington. Trump vowed to help more pro-life Republicans get elected to Congress and to push for more restrictions on abortion. He also called on Congress to pass a 20-week abortion ban. (CNS Reuters/Al Drago)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 25, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Two recent press releases from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops highlight the fact that the nation's bishops, as a body, still have not figured out how to deal with the presidency of Donald Trump, nor accurately weighed the values at stake in this fraught political moment.

The first press release came from three committee chairmen, Bishop Frank Dewane, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, and Bishop James Conley, respectively of the committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development, Religious Liberty, and the subcommittee on the Promotion and Defense of Marriage. The bishops applauded state-level action to shield religious organizations that provide foster care and adoption services from having to place children with same-sex couples. "Kansas and Oklahoma are keeping kids first by allowing all capable adoption and foster care providers to serve children in need, " the bishops stated. "The opioid crisis has caused a large increase in the number of children entering the foster care system. We need more, not fewer, agencies to serve children who need loving homes."

They noted that Kansas and Oklahoma join seven other states — Virginia, Michigan, North Dakota, South Dakota, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas — in enacting such laws and that "[t]hese laws do not exclude any providers or prohibit anyone from adopting but merely ensure the inclusion of faith-based providers."

This is a close call. I remember the pain felt in the Boston Archdiocese when Catholic Charities had to stop doing adoptions because the state refused to relent on their demand that all providers accept all parent-applicants, and the Holy See refused to budge in its insistence that it could never be in the best interest of the child to place a child with a same-sex couple.

As a factual matter, the Vatican was wrong. Virtually all social workers will tell you that there are some same-sex foster parents and adoptive parents who are magnificent and whose means, and lack of other children, permit them to handle especially challenging placements and adoptions. As a cultural matter, the Vatican's

concern is not baseless, but it is coarse and needs to be fleshed out: If allowing same-sex couples to adopt is part of a broader agenda to enact so-called gender ideology, then there is a prudential judgment to be made about whether or not a fight is warranted. I do not believe it is, and if a same-sex couple is willing and able to adopt or foster children, I do not see a compelling reason for the church to object.

Advertisement

But make no mistake about it: There are people who would like to drive the Catholic Church out of the realm of providing social services altogether, and if this route does not work, they will look for something else.

The second press release came from Cardinal Timothy Dolan in his capacity as chair of the Pro-Life Activities Committee. The cardinal applauded the administration's decision to deny Title X family planning funding to organizations that perform abortions.

"The news that the Trump Administration will be issuing new regulations to separate abortion from the federal Title X family planning program is greatly needed and deeply appreciated, " the cardinal stated. "Abortion always takes the life of a child and often harms the mother, her surviving children, and other family and friends as well. Most Americans recognize that abortion is distinct from family planning and has no place in a taxpayer-funded family planning program. For too long, Title X has been used to subsidize the abortion industry."

There are several problems with this statement. First, the bishops should be a lot more careful about invoking the "money is fungible" argument because it can cut both ways. As noted, there are people who think the church should never receive money from the government when we help immigrants or provide foster care services, etc. They could deploy the "money is fungible" argument against us, too.

Second, I do not have a problem distinguishing between the moral gravity of contraception and that of abortion, but William May, among other conservative moral theologians, argued for many years that contraception is the "gateway drug" to the culture of death. Which is it?

But there is a much, much larger problem with both these statements. They strike me as celebrating a small victory while being blissfully ignorant of looming disaster. The bishops, like House Speaker Paul Ryan and most congressional Republicans, sit in their political dinghy, happy to have found another day's worth of rations, ignoring the tsunami cresting right behind them.

The time is coming when the American people will look at Donald Trump the way Nicole Kidman looked at Christopher Walken at the end of "The Stepford Wives" and say, as Kidman did: "I can do better." (If the American people do not ever have their come-to-Jesus moment regarding Trump, well, then nothing matters.) When the pendulum swings the other way, it will not be as in times past when the White House changes partisan hands. The word "collaborator" will come into vogue again. Anything this man touched will be ruined, and ruined for a long, long time.

If departing Senator Jeff Flake can figure this out, why can't our bishops? "Our presidency has been debased," the conservative Republican senator said in an address to the graduating class at Harvard Law School, "by a figure who has a seemingly bottomless appetite for destruction and division. And only a passing familiarity with how the Constitution works."

The bishops need to measure the potential cost of even being caught in the same picture frame as this man who offends every principle of democracy and the rule of law, who has now mistaken the Department of Justice for Michael Cohen, and whose narcissism apparently knows no limit. This is not a time to try and get the football as far down the field as possible on Title X funding. This is the time to step away and think deeply about how some of our more vocal bishops have been complicit in this political train wreck that has afflicted the country and imagine what they can do to repair the destruction and the division.

[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'll notify you when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.

A version of this story appeared in the **June 29-July 12, 2018** print issue under the headline: US bishops are complicit in our political train wreck.