Opinion

News



President Donald Trump, flanked by religious leaders, signs his Executive Order on Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty during a National Day of Prayer event at the White House in Washington May 4. (CNS photo/Jim Lo Scalzo, EPA)



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President Donald Trump does not score any points for having ended the policy of separating immigrant children from their parents a policy that he never should have started in the first place. No one should have been surprised that he used immigrant families as pawns in his political and psychological games: The narcissist-in-chief has made hatefulness of immigrants one of his calling cards since he announced his candidacy. Still, it was the degree to which he so obviously cared more about his own need to appear tough than about the consequences of his policy on the lives of others that was exceptionally striking.

More clearly than ever before, we were able to witness the emergence of the paradigm through which the morality of our politic life is most accurately viewed: One pole has Trump and the politics of racist nationalism, and the other pole has Pope Francis and the politics of Christian humanism. The separation of the immigrant children at the border served to highlight this most clarifying lens.

Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, one of the Holy Father's strongest advocates, was on fire. He let loose with a statement on twitter that scorched the Windy City's iPhones.

"There is nothing remotely Christian, American, or morally defensible about a policy that takes children away from their parents and warehouses them in cages," the first tweet began.

The full statement can be read here. The cardinal also took to his local television stations to make his point.

Cupichs words, in their force and their honesty, mark a real moment for the church in the United States. I wish the statement would be known forevermore by its opening words and translated into Latin, like an encyclical: *Nihil est*! They are appropriate to the age.

The sentences that crossed the Rubicon of prophetic witness were these: "We are told that family separations are required by the law or court decisions. That is not true. The administration could, if it so desired, end these wanton acts of cruelty, today." I have heard prelates refer to the dishonesty of previous presidents and other political leaders privately, but I do not recall a cardinal asserting simply "this is not true" in regard to a statement made by the nation's chief executive. It is about time.

Cupich doubled down against the effort by some, like Attorney General Jeff Sessions, White House spokesperson Sarah Huckabee Sanders and evangelical pastor and Trump supporter Robert Jeffress to use the bible to support the president's policies. "Scripture tells us that God requires no one to follow unjust laws," Cupich thundered. "It also admonishes us against bearing false witness."

One does not need to look into the president's soul to determine that he is lying through his teeth. Just go to the videotape: The Washington Post usefully catalogued the mutually contradictory statements coming from the White House. Fourteen times, the administration changed its tune.

Thursday, while the House voted, the president met with his Cabinet. Watch the video. It is painful. He clings to a few claims and repeats them endlessly. It is not clear he knows what he is saying: "extremist open-border Democrats;" "I think we're going to have a red wave, not a blue wave;" "My wife, our First Lady, is down at the border ... because we are all bothered by it;" "the ridiculous filibuster rule." "Bring me an ice cream sundae with M & M's." Okay, he did not say that last quote, but he might as well have.

The president repeated a foundational lie several times last week, a lie that he repeated throughout the campaign: "Without borders, we don't have a country." Who says? If he is right, and our immigration policy has been such a disaster for fifty years, and we effectively have open borders, does that mean we have not been a country these past fifty years? I certainly have been asked for my passport when I land back at JFK. I seem to remember a large group of Olympic athletes all wearing red, white, and blue and winning lots of medals last February. Statisticians measure our country's GDP, analyze our trade deficits, predict future economic growth rates. Map makers draw a line along the 49th parallel, then through the Great Lakes and up the St. Lawrence, and they label everything south of that line "U.S.A." In what way have we "not been a country?" as Trump states so confidently.

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But rewind that videotape and close your eyes. Listen to the rhetorical cadences. They strike me as the linguistic equivalent of the body language that Il Duce would employ on the loggia of the Palazzo Venezia, the arms crossed on his chest, the chin thrust forward, the arms placed firmly on the balustrade, the bobbing of the head, the powerful gesticulation with the full arm. If you set that to music, you get Wagner. If you set it to words, you get Trump explaining his position on immigration.

The leaders of the Christian churches should no longer participate, even minimally, in anything that normalizes this presidency. Just as the otherwise praiseworthy career of Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, Vatican Secretary of State to Pope Pius XI, was forever stained by the photos of him with Mussolini signing the Lateran Treaties, so clerics who undertake normal, otherwise non-controversial dealings with President Trump risk the resulting photo becoming their legacy. Go ahead, put Cardinal Gasparri's name into Google Images and on the very first row, you see him and Mussolini.

Some of us have looked at Trump as our 21st century answer to Mussolini longer than others. After last week, no one who isn't drunk on the Trump Kool-aid can fail to see it. This wasn't about immigration to Trump. It was Ethiopia in 1935. It was about the leader's self-image and the regime's propaganda, about him looking tough, the lives of innocents be damned. With such narcissists, there are only two choices, resist or collaborate. It is time for the leaders of the Catholic Church to resist.

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

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