Opinion
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by Michael Sean Winters

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My colleague Heidi Schlumpf reported last week on the geofencing efforts being employed by a group called CatholicVote.org. Everything about the report is frightening, and it should call forth from our bishops' conference a condemnation in the strongest terms.

When it comes to technology, I am a proud Luddite. People make fun of me because I do not like to use online banking or to purchase things online. The health insurance company is always pestering me to use their online services, and I have no interest in doing so. Most technological advances related to computers in the last 30 years have trumpeted the fact that they increase the speed or the ease with which a particular project can be accomplished. I am not convinced that our culture suffered from being too slow or too demanding.

What CatholicVote is doing, however, seems qualitatively different from what an insurance company or the airlines do. CatholicVote is not asking anyone's permission to access their information. People whose sole objective of a Sunday morning is to worship their Lord and seek the intercession of his mother are having

their personal information invaded and taken, whether they like it or not. The organization can then target them on those same cellphones with propaganda.

"With this mobile targeting, we are able to reach our fellow Catholics in the pews," wrote the group's president, Brian Burch, in a blog post last month. "And we can ensure that our fellow Catholic voters get the facts and hear the truth — not the latest lies peddled by the media."

Does anyone want to take odds on these "facts" and this "truth" resembling the falsehoods and lies peddled regularly on Fox News? Lies that have their origin in the disinformation offices of Russian security services?

It does not seem to have occurred to Burch that he is crossing a line that should not be crossed. It is true that our brothers and sisters in the black evangelical church have a long tradition of political involvement, with candidates coming to the sanctuaries on Sunday to speak to the congregation and buses driving those congregants to early-voting venues as the election draws near. That is not our Catholic tradition. Church was one of the few places where African Americans could come together without interference from the dominant white culture, and so the tradition of explicit political activity is understandable.

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The First Amendment does not erect a wall of separation between church and state, no matter what Thomas Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptists. But it is part of our American culture that while we should be jealous of both our civil and religious liberties, keeping these two important societal arenas distinct is a healthy thing. In this free country of ours, no religion should claim political preference, and certainly no political party has earned the right to consider itself particularly religious. There has long been an anti-Catholic slant to our founding documents, but the hard edges of hating the Jesuits has worn off the line "without mental reservation" in the oath of office members of Congress and other officers of state take.

Our Catholic theology also leaves wide scope to the individual Catholic to choose her political preferences after having formed her conscience with the assistance of the teachings of the church. Historically, loyal Catholics have usually found their most suitable political home within the arms of parties on the left. I am guessing Burch

and his colleagues at CatholicVote would disagree with these words:

> Democratic socialism managed to fit within the two existing models as a welcome counterweight to the radical liberal positions, which it developed and corrected. It also managed to appeal to various denominations. In England it became the political party of the Catholics, who had never felt at home among either the Protestant conservatives or the liberals. In Wilhelmine Germany, too, Catholic groups felt closer to democratic socialism than to the rigidly Prussian and Protestant conservative forces. In many respects, democratic socialism was and is close to Catholic social doctrine and has in any case made a remarkable contribution to the formation of a social consciousness.

These words are not mine. They were penned by Pope Benedict XVI.

The problem here, however, is not that CatholicVote is a Republican-leaning organization. This geofencing would be as repulsive if it were being conducted at churches by Democratic-leaning organizations. There is a difference between grabbing information from people going to church and handing out pamphlets at the supermarket. Church is different, and this crass use of the decision to attend Mass as a source of political information contradicts our American and our Catholic traditions.

It is worse than that, actually, in part because it is being done by Catholics and Americans. If this had happened to me, I would feel violated. This geofencing is a betrayal of the culture necessary to support a pluralistic democracy and a betrayal of the ecclesial tradition of being political but not partisan.

The vulgar commodification of religious practice that geofencing entails adds an additional layer of repugnance.

The U.S. bishops' conference should publicly denounce this geofencing. Individual bishops should denounce it. Pastors should denounce it. Here is a time and an issue on which the religious liberty crowd should defend the independence of the church from political interference. For a decade, we have been told that filling out a form so as to claim an exemption from a government regulation was the essence of tyranny, an affront against our religious liberty. The memory of St. Thomas Becket was invoked. How do you think Becket would respond if King Henry II started geofencing

around Canterbury?

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

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