Opinion
News



U.S. President Donald Trump applauds after addressing thousands during the 47th annual March for Life in Washington Jan. 24. (CNS/Reuters/Leah Millis)



by Tom Roberts

View Author Profile
troberts@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

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

January 29, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

I told the story in this space years ago, about a conversation with a Catholic prelate during the mid-1990s, early in the Clinton administration. It occurred at a bishops' meeting in Washington.

In this instance, I was speaking with a prelate who was a kind of prototype of today's culture-warrior bishop. He was influential in the episcopacy's anti-abortion strategy. For that reason, his admission was striking. I can't remember verbatim the entire conversation but I recall vividly the phrase he used at one point: "We were badly used."

The "we" were the bishops and, by extension, the U.S. church at large. The reference was to the little gained by the bishops' abortion strategy during the 12 years of the preceding Reagan and Bush administrations. In the context of the conversation, he was saying that the bishops had gone the limit, pushed the envelope on church-state separation and delivered a lot of "pro-life" candidates, and received little for it.

He wouldn't allow an on-the-record interview, wouldn't allow his name to be attached to the comment.

Of course, NCR understood that reality quite apart from the good bishop's comments, but we made the case for years without the authority of those who could have lent additional credibility to the argument. The episcopal silence created an intellectual and truth-telling disconnect that has echoed through the decades. A disconnect confirmed for me in the interim, more often than not, in conversations with individual bishops, none of whom would go on the record.

In essence, amid the loud true believers in the episcopal corps are others who understand the political reality. They understood that the nation's bishops were painting themselves into a tight partisan corner. Their refusal to admit their unease with the legal absolutists among them created an internal discordance that would only occasionally cut through the surface.

A united front emerged, and it preached that only one political approach was possible, a very simple and linear approach to a complex issue, beneath which all other concerns were submerged. It was all in or nothing.

On Jan. 24, the most glaring intellectual disconnect, a display of moral dissonance that an Orwell would have been hard-put to imagine, was in full view on the National Mall. Thousands of Catholics, encouraged by more than a few bishops, joined the throng hailing President Donald Trump as a pro-life savior.

Advertisement

The selling of the church's moral authority is complete. When someone so morally bankrupt and demonstrably anti-life as Trump, a misogynist who brags about assaulting women and whose primary interaction with others is to demean and degrade, can command the obeisance of the nation's Catholic leaders, the moral tank has been emptied. A few Franciscan friars on the periphery provided the rare witness that being pro-life for Catholics requires far more than opposing abortion.

The display on the mall drains the phrase "pro-life" of meaning and sells the church even deeper into service of an ideology that severely diminishes Catholicism as a credible moral force in the larger culture.

The church's credibility was sold to the highest political bidder and the chief auctioneer banged the gavel down on the final deal.

Trump is interested only in transactions. He hasn't a gnat's understanding of transformation, of persuasion that doesn't involve his idea of a deal. His words on the mall and the cynical use of the Vatican in Vice President Mike Pence's call-in from Rome sealed this wretched transaction.

The Catholic Church in the United States has been used and manipulated by the era's most unconscionable con artist. He wanted your faces, your shouts of support, what will undoubtedly become in his universe "the biggest assembly of Catholics ever for any president in history!"

He's got the images he needs. It won't be the last time you'll see them. Welcome to his campaign.

An alternative model was available those many years ago when the prelate was confessing we had been "badly used." The church could have owned the moral high ground and avoided becoming captive of far-right political operatives. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago attempted to construct an approach more in

line with the long tradition of Catholic social teaching and with a more nuanced and mature understanding of the church's place in society. It was an approach motivated by his concern that Catholics find a way to deal with difficult subjects in dialogue with one another.

But the first generation of the culture-warrior episcopacy wouldn't hear it. Bernardin was publicly kneecapped by the likes of fellow Cardinals Bernard Law and Anthony Bevilacqua, both of whom ended their careers in disgrace, who asserted that dialogue was not needed in the church, just obedience to the law and authority.

The Bernardin initiative — embodied in phrases such as "seamless garment" and "consistent ethic of life" — was shelved.

It is fortunate, perhaps, that the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering occurred back-to-back with the March for Life. The gathering brings to the fore a host of other life issues — capital punishment, human trafficking, family separation, incarceration, and maternal and child health — that put the lie to Trump as a pro-life champion.

A certain grace attaches, then, to the appearance at the gathering of another cardinal from Chicago, Blase Cupich. You can read the text of his speech in which he carves out space for those who understand the high cost extracted from the church in this sectarian bargain.

The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, Cupich said, announced the "birth of a new humanism, where people are defined first of all by their responsibility to their brothers and sisters and to history." That understanding of relationship "opens up a new way of being Church and of understanding our baptismal call. It makes us more aware of the need for a consistent ethic as we promote human dignity and justice for all. It also helps us achieve a proper balance as the Church engages the world of politics and as we take up our ministry to the least in our midst."

Cupich takes up where Bernardin left off in the late cardinal's wish for an alternative to division "that cripples." Leaning heavily on *Gaudium et Spes* and the more recent insights of Pope Francis, Cupich appeals for the kind of whole and unified understanding of social ministry that "subverts any attempt to fragment our Catholic social teaching, pretending to offer so-called non-negotiables, which ends up reducing our moral tradition to a single set of issues."

In that context, speaking of the "preeminence" of one life threat over another, as recently asserted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in its latest version of the document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," is both inconsistent and illogical.

In a statement enunciating his vision, Bernardin was seeing far down the road: "Unless we examine our situation with fresh eyes, open minds and changed hearts," he said, "within a few decades a vital Catholic legacy may be squandered, to the loss of both the church and the nation." We've arrived at that point, but we need not remain there.

[Tom Roberts is NCR executive editor. His email address is troberts@ncronline.org.]

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 7-20, 2020** print issue under the headline: Trump seals his Catholic deal.