Opinion

News



President Donald Trump speaks Jan. 24 during the annual March for Life rally in Washington. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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In what was surely one of the most read and shared pieces from NCR's website last week, executive editor Tom Roberts analyzed the implications for the Catholic Church of President Donald Trump's appearance at this year's March for Life.

"The selling of the church's moral authority is complete," Roberts wrote in his very fine piece. "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."

But the essay left me questioning two of Roberts' key assertions. Namely that the bishops are "captives of far-right political operatives," and that their decadeslong anti-abortion campaign was exploited — or "badly used" as one unnamed bishop put it — by Republican politicians who give little in return.

These claims assume something that I do not think we can assume: that the bishops' very vocal and deeply political fight against the legalization of abortion has really only been about the "protection of the unborn," as they would say.

The fact that the bishops would ally themselves so publicly and sordidly with Trump at the March for Life demonstrates that their primary motivation may not be protecting the "sanctity of human life," but, rather, something else that Trump knows a lot more about: having power over women and their bodies.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the real endgame in the bishops' anti-abortion fight is the radical desire to control women's agency and women's fertility.

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The Catholic Church is the only religious body that opposes the use of contraception and reproductive technologies like in vitro fertilization. Evangelicals and Mormons,

the Catholic bishops' usual allies in the sexual purity wars, have no interest in these battles.

The bishops' peculiar fixation on female reproduction is further evidenced in their complete disinterest in issues pertaining to male fertility and sexuality. When was the last time you heard a cleric rail against vasectomies or push for laws that regulate men's bodies?

The Catholic hierarchy's anti-abortion fight has reasserted time and again that women are not capable of using their own consciences to make the complex moral decisions that are best for their lives, their health and their families. And the bishops espouse a theology that insists that a women's most essential role is motherhood. This is why bishops demand that, even if conception happened through sexual violence or even if a pregnancy threatens the life of a mother, a woman should still be forced to give birth.

But I believe there is something even deeper going on here. Giving a woman a legal right to have control and agency over her body translates to other aspects of her life, namely her freedom to claim political, economic and social autonomy. The bishops reject the notion that women are equal to men and that they can live independently from men. So how could they possibly support any right that would lead women into that kind of power and liberty?

Roberts believes that the bishops would have "owned the moral high ground" if they had taken the consistent ethic of life approach espoused by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in the 1980s. But, in my view, the reason they could never achieve moral credibility is because their motivations in the anti-abortion movement were never really that pure.

The fact that 56% of U.S. Catholics believe that abortion should be legal in most or all cases suggests that the majority of the laity can see through the bishops' campaign, too.

As much as Roberts wants to believe that members of the Catholic hierarchy are "captives of far-right political operatives," the reality is that many of the bishops are themselves far-right political operatives. Witness their extraordinary lobbying efforts to remove the contraceptive mandate from the Affordable Care Act back in 2012,

and their years of radical campaigning against marriage equality, and, of course, their deeply influential efforts to "promote religious liberty," which is the latest incarnation of their crusade to prevent women from accessing reproductive health care and to keep LGBTQ persons from equal benefits and protections.

As I wrote in this column in February 2017, the bishops' tacit support for Trump's presidential campaign started paying off in spades just one month after his inauguration, and they continue reaping benefits to this day.

A few examples:

- Trump rescinded the Mexico City policy, effectively barring U.S. aid to any international organization that provides abortions or even offers counseling about abortion, which allowed Catholic agencies access to a massive amount of new grant funding;
- Trump got conservative, anti-abortion justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh on the Supreme Court;
- Trump validated and emboldened the bishops' religious liberty claims by signing executive orders, allowing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to create the Commission on Unalienable Rights, and appointing conservative Catholics like William Barr, the current attorney general, to pivotal government positions.

Some bishops have found shrewd ways to show Trump their appreciation.

Like last week, when New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan (who, may we never forget, offered an invocation at Trump's inauguration) interviewed Barr on his Sirius XM radio channel.

Barr warned Dolan and his audience that "militant secularists are trying to impose their values on religious people," and also suggested that only religious people are "capable of disciplining themselves according to moral values."

Dolan sounded like a very willing participant in political manipulation as he used his own platform to allow Barr to spout lies and panic-inducing propaganda.

So, yes, Roberts is absolutely right: the U.S. bishops have eroded what moral credibility they might have still had. But they are not manipulated victims of a reactionary political machine. They are fully conscious and willing enablers of it. One could even argue that they are the thought leadership behind the right-wing's

rhetoric.

Listen closely to Mike Pence or Mike Pompeo or William Barr speak about religious liberty, or women's rights, or reproductive health care, or marriage and you can hear the theology of Catholic bishops undergirding it all.

Like Roberts, I believe that the actions of the bishops at this year's March for Life were deeply cynical, I'm just more of a cynic about what their deepest motivations might be.

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