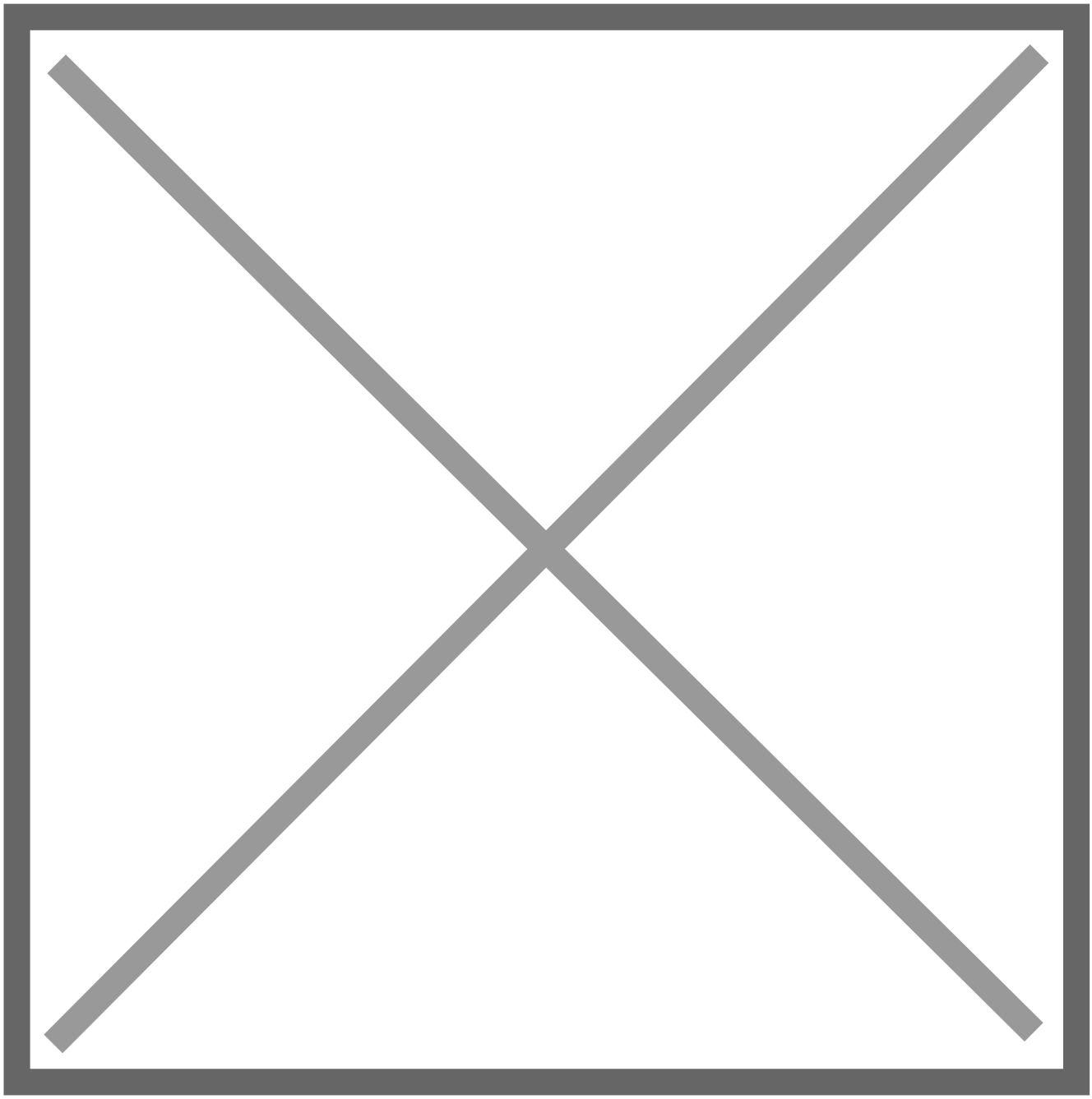
Opinion
News



From left: Michael Bayer, Raul Zegarra and Adrienne Alexander speak at a panel during "The Catholic Vote and the 2020 Election" program held Feb. 29 at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. (Courtesy of CTU/Tim Frakes)



by Mark Piper

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"I am exhausted." So said John Gehring, Catholic program director for Faith in Public Life, at "The Catholic Vote and the 2020 Election" program. The Feb. 29 event, geared for Catholics ages 21 through 40, was sponsored by The Weal, Commonweal magazine's reading group for under-40 professionals and the Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

Juxtaposed against the shared feeling of electoral exhaustion was the relaxed, perhaps even lively, ambience. It was a Saturday night in the city after all. Before the formal conversation began, those who attended took in live music, food and drinks.

While Gehring opened up the event, he was flanked by three panelists who in turn had 10 minutes to discuss their faith in public life and respond to Gehring's opening commentary. Those three panelists were Adrienne Alexander, director of intergovernmental relations for the AFSCME Council 31 (the Illinois local of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees trade union); Michael Bayer, director of evangelization and adult formation for St. Clement Catholic Church in Chicago; and Raul Zegarra, a doctoral candidate in the divinity school at the University of Chicago. The event was moderated by Mariam Pera, who organizes The Weal group in Chicago. Steven P. Millies and Peter Cunningham of the Bernardin Center were also on hand to help facilitate the evening.

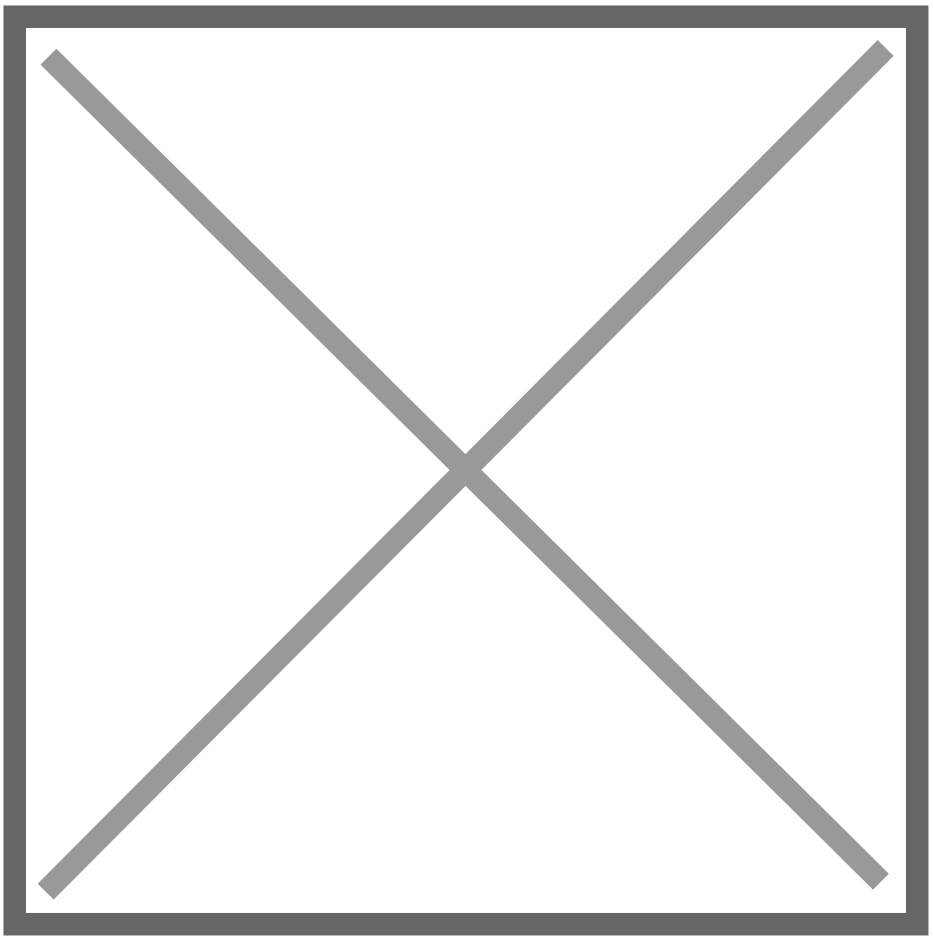
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After the panelists spoke in turn, Pera asked questions before opening up the conversation to all who had gathered.

Credit must be given to the Bernardin Center and Commonweal in part for hosting such an event for young Catholics, but more importantly for choosing Gehring and the panelists. As Gehring said in his opening comments, discussing the 2020 election was apropos for this suffering, penitential season of Lent. If anyone showed up to the event anticipating the worst — hoping for a "Crossfire"-like conservative versus progressive Catholic back-and-forth — you would have been sorely disappointed. If you thought there would be overt or insinuated endorsements of candidates or party platforms, again, you would have left empty handed.

Yes, candidates like Sen. Bernie Sanders and his affinity for quoting Pope Francis on the environment came up; Joe Biden, the only Catholic left in the race, and who was denied Communion last fall, was mentioned in passing; and Donald Trump being the first president to attend the March for Life in person was also discussed in light of Christian charity, devoid of sarcasm, ad hominem attacks or other partisan word play. Abortion was discussed, as were copious components of Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers, just wages, treatment of migrants, the church's prohibition of the death penalty, LGBTQ Catholics, the efficacy of statements from the bishop's conference, anti-racism and the rise of white nationalism and Christian nationalism.

Gehring noted that while there is no monolithic Catholic vote, in states like Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, the Catholic population is of strategic electoral importance.



People gathered for "The Catholic Vote and the 2020 Election" program held Feb. 29 Catholic Theological Union in Chicago (Courtesy of CTU/Tim Frakes)

"We're in a time of crisis for both our church and country," he said. "Along with many Catholics, I often find myself angry and exhausted at injustices and abuse of power. But the antidote to despair and cynicism is the hope I find in faithful activists who are working at the border, in prisons or wherever the margins are to bring those peripheries to the center of our consciences and public conversations. Politics can't be reduced to poll-tested messages or the horse race of electoral strategy. Politics is about engaged citizenship, discernment and activism. We're in this collective work together because, at the end of the day, we build the kind of church and democracy we want to see."

In his 10 minutes at the podium, Zegarra provided an intriguing academic talk centered on self-identification and how one's party affiliation appears to have a greater impact than the church's dogma. As an example, on marriage equality, he pointed out that while a large majority of Catholic Democrats support marriage

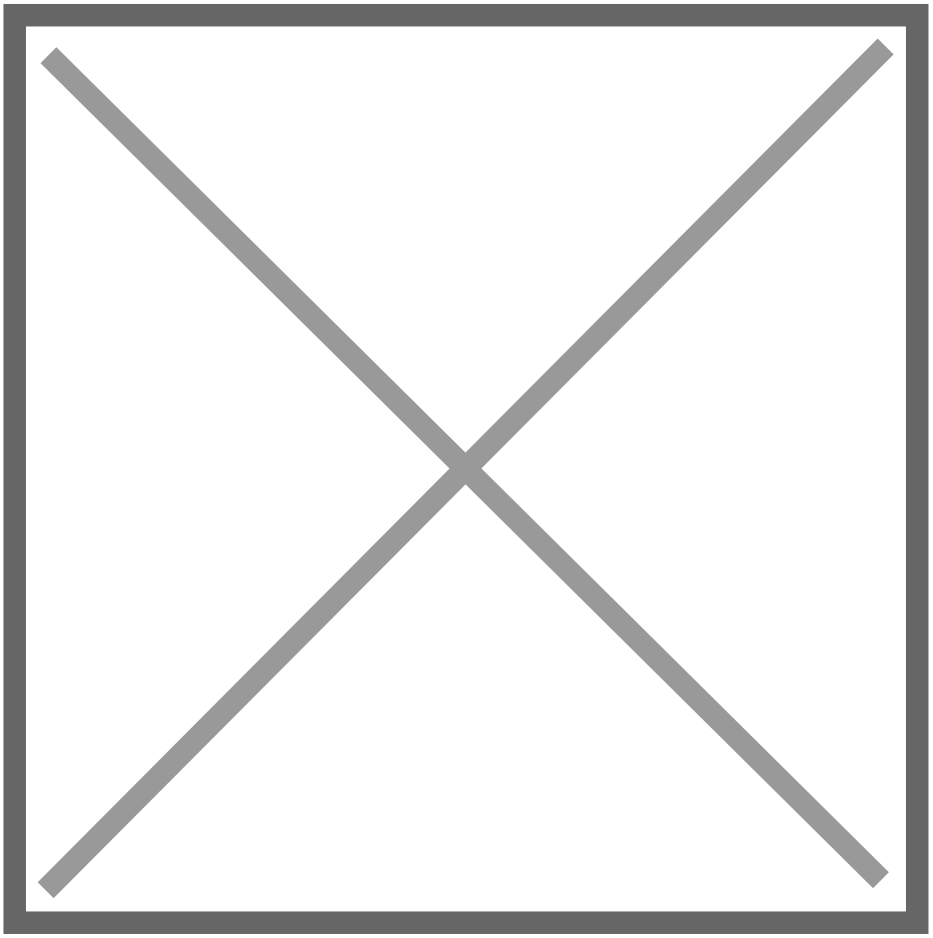
equality, a sizable minority of Republican Catholics also supports marriage equality, meaning that in the United States a solid majority of Catholics hold views in clear opposition to the church's position.

Alexander's comments focused on being impactful at the local level, on sections of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship (anti-racism, unjust war and meaningful work) and that this is a time for renewal not retreat. Alexander asked, and then gave very practical answers to, questions like, "What does engagement look like?"

After the presentation, I asked what gives her hope.

"I know from my work, engaged people can be influential," Alexander said. "There were a lot of folks here interested in engaging and encountering in a way that goes well beyond casting a vote in one presidential election."

In fact, Alexander mentioned Injustice Watch and how an impact in criminal justice reform requires voters learn the positions of the judges they vote for. Catholics could assist and be involved with their state's Catholic conference, and, of course, become educated on ballot measures and local races.



John Gehring during "The Catholic Vote and the 2020 Election" program Feb. 29 at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago (Courtesy of CTU/Tim Frakes)

Bayer displayed passion and energy, eschewing the podium to speak with vigor on four things Catholics must model and engage in: invitation, formation, sanctification and reconciliation. He went on to plead with those gathered to break out of the existing MSNBC Catholic versus Fox News Catholic dichotomy in how we act, see and speak to one another. We are united in Christ, and that should be larger than our party affiliation and should turn us away from the political entertainment industry. For specific things we could do at the parish level, check out his Twitter feed: @mbayer1248.

In his comments, Bayer was most compelling on sections of sanctification, the need to ensure folks have a sanctuary from the news cycle, the need for the full range of church teaching to be taught (formation), and the need to model reconciliation and paths forward especially in the days after the general election.

I asked Millies, director of the Bernardin Center, what he thought of the event he had organized.

"The turnout and the conversation made this event the most satisfying one we've had," he began. "I was especially gratified by that moment after one person 'outed' herself as a Trump supporter and someone else, not a Trump supporter, invited her to coffee. It's not necessary that we all agree about everything. … I think that younger people can help us break the habit of division."

"Catholics have to be, must be, witnesses to dialogue," he concluded. "It's the only sort of faithful citizenship that matters, and I don't shrink from saying that dialogue is our 'pre-eminent priority.' Nothing can be accomplished in politics that we don't do together. We must find ways to do the right thing together, and that means engaging people who disagree with us."

It may be exhausting, but if we want to move from the agony of this garden to new life, we had better stay awake, better make some noise and better find our prophetic voice. The young adults I listened to choose to engage their faith and our shared political life not through ridicule and criticism but through proclamation and witness. That was an unexpected vote of confidence in the future.

[Mark Piper, a Packers fan in an unholy land, works in the nonprofit sector and resides in Chicago with his family. He is an alumnus of Amate House, an AmeriCorps-approved year of service organization sponsored by the Chicago Archdiocese.]

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