Opinion

News



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



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

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

March 16, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Last week, President Donald Trump's campaign announced it would be launching a "Catholics for Trump" coalition at an event in Milwaukee.

The next day, Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki issued a statement distancing himself from the event.

"First, the 'Catholics for Trump' rally is an event that is hosted by President Donald Trump," Listecki wrote. "The event is not hosted by the Catholic Church nor the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, the local church of southeastern Wisconsin. Second, the Catholic Church and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee are not endorsing the rally and are in no way affiliated to or sponsoring this event or campaign locally, statewide, or nationally."

Maybe the organizers of "Catholics for Trump" should have done their homework. Listecki is no liberal, to be sure, but he was also a member of the United Steelworkers union while a seminarian, working at a blast furnace in Chicago during the summers to earn money to pay for his education. He also kept the conservatives in the Wisconsin Catholic Conference from embracing former Gov. Scott Walker's anti-union agenda. He is not a partisan Democrat, but he is not a partisan Republican either.

Advertisement

Then, citing the threat of coronavirus, the event was scrapped by the Trump campaign. The campaign tweeted that the event would be rescheduled however so the issue will be back: should the church actively discourage such partisan groups?

The short answer is yes.

Catholics *qua* Catholics have long been a part of American politics. Throughout the 18th century, they were the ideological photographic negative of what American colonists and early Republicans meant when they said they were "free." In the refrain to the patriotic tune "Rule, Britannia," the bit about never being slaves was

not about blacks in the American South but about being subject to priestcraft and absolute monarchy like the French.

In the 19th century, it was mostly in a similar negative image that Catholics impacted politics: Samuel Burchard's warning against "rum, Romanism and rebellion " at an 1884 rally for Republican candidate James Blaine was made because he thought it would help his candidate win. By 1960, nuns in full habit stood along motorcade routes with signs indicating their support for John F. Kennedy. Hubert Humphrey knew what he was doing when, during the 1960 primaries in which he was challenging Kennedy, he chose for his campaign theme song "Give Me That Old Time Religion," but it seems that it backfired, angering and motivating more Catholics to rush out and support Kennedy than driving fearful Protestants to vote against.

Catholic support for the Democrats, never total, began to wane or at least shift in the years after Kennedy's assassination and, more importantly, Lyndon Johnson's support for civil rights. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had seen the same kind of hatred on the streets of suburban Chicago as he had seen in the bayous of Mississippi. During the 1972 primaries, George Wallace not only carried several southern states, he also won Maryland and Michigan, states with significant Catholic populations. That was before the Supreme Court decision in *Roe* vs. *Wade* in 1973. It took almost a decade for the pro-life and pro-choice caucuses to sort themselves by party, but by the 1980s, it was clear that conservative Catholics were firmly in the Republican camp and more liberal Catholics stayed with the Democrats. At the same time, Catholic practice began to decline, but much more so among liberals than conservatives.

On both the left and the right, political affiliation began to be a stronger indicator of where a person stands on an issue rather than religious affiliation. Groups with oxymoronic names like "Catholics for Choice" muddied the waters, as did the organized effort to dispute the U.S. bishops' pastoral letters on disarmament and economics.

In 2004, the candidacy of John Kerry led some bishops to take a stance that none had before: denying communion to a Catholic candidate because of his position on abortion. Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput was more equivocal than his suffragan Bishop Michael Sheridan of Colorado Springs and his colleague Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis. The bishops' stance angered many Catholic Democrats and, in 2008, they determined to provide some cover for Barack Obama. "Catholics for

Obama" was launched. I remember thinking at the time that it was necessary but also represented a different kind of political organization that was deeply problematic, at least from an ecclesial point of view.



President Donald Trump addresses the nation from the Oval Office of the White House March 11 on the country's expanded response against the global coronavirus outbreak. (Official White House photo/Joyce N. Boghosian)

One of the founders of the group, and its first national co-chair, was former Duquesne Law School dean Nicholas Cafardi. I asked him this week if he thought that these kinds of organizations, understandable at the time, were still a good idea.

"If by Catholics for Trump or Catholics for Biden, you mean that neither political party is four-square with Catholic values, then I agree," Cafardi told me in an email. "If you mean that our bishops should stay out of endorsing candidates, then I agree. If, however, you mean that we should not bring our Catholic values into the voting booth, and prior to voting, not explain — even publicly — how our Catholic values have informed our vote, (which I know you do not mean — but others might so

interpret such a position, e.g., no Catholics for Trump or Biden), then I would disagree."

Not for the first time, Cafardi's sage advice has kept me from advocating a rash and ultimately mistaken position!

Still, as I noted last week in my series on H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, the collapse of our ecclesial life into political ideologies and strategies needs to stop. Maybe the bishops should follow Listecki's lead and simply make sure that everyone knows these organizations are political organizations, not religious ones. Maybe they should more actively discourage them. Maybe the bishops should stay out of it altogether. I am not entirely resolved in my own mind which way forward is best for our country or for our church.

In my indecision and ambivalence, I sit with my confusion and then, in a moment of inspiration, and after watching EWTN's Raymond Arroyo defend the president's response to the coronavirus, it hits me: I am framing the question wrongly. It is not a matter of whether or not a Catholic can and should vote for Trump. The issue is whether any sentient being should do so. The answer is increasingly and obviously in the negative.

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

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*

A version of this story appeared in the **April 17-30, 2020** print issue under the headline: How partisan should Catholics be?.