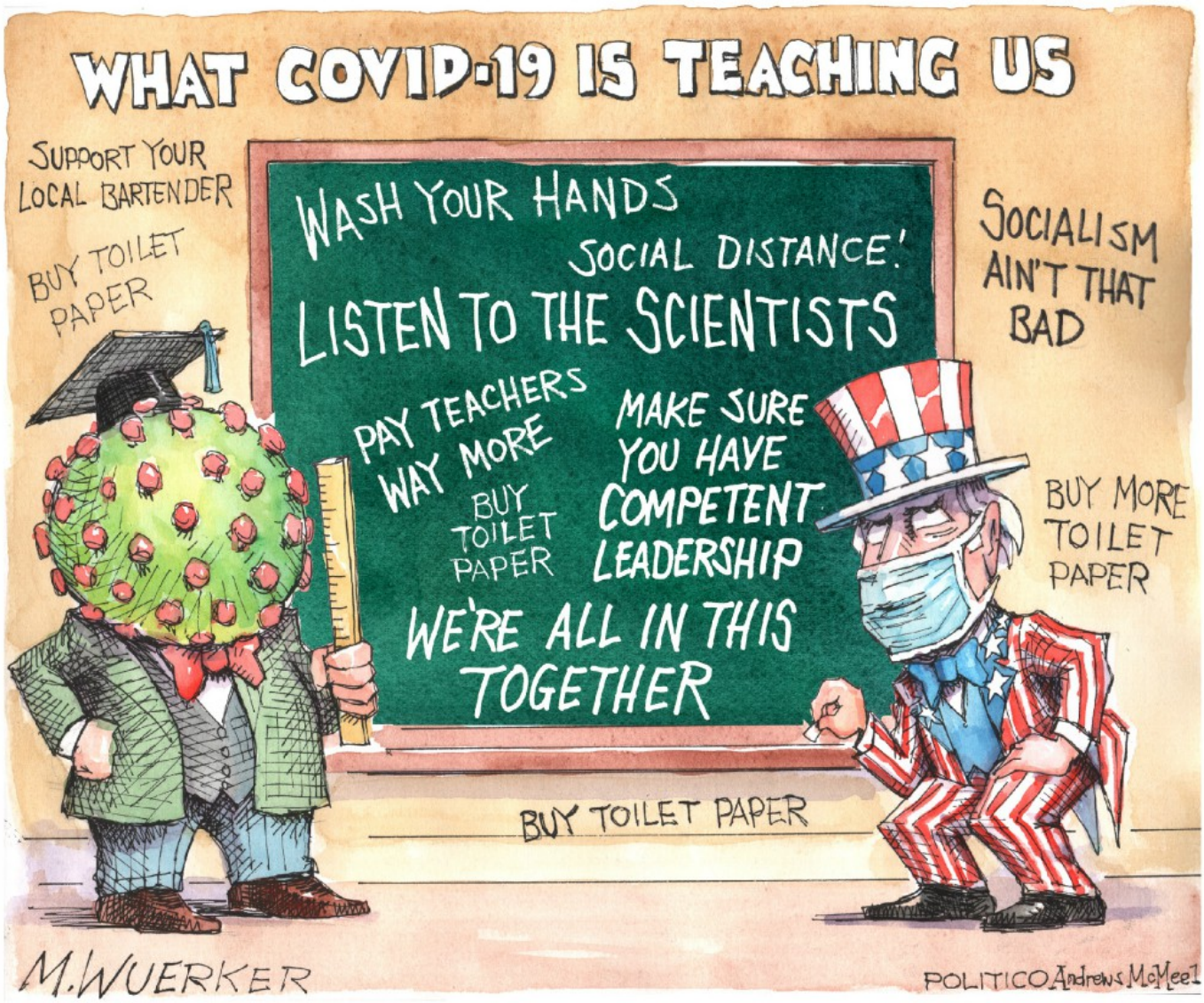
Opinion
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by NCR Editorial Staff

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Several significant questions emerge, entwined, from the chaos of the moment. One is about Catholicism and its public expression, the other about our civic/political life and, in each instance, how they might be transformed in the post-pandemic era.

In the civil realm, the question is whether truth, or the pursuit of it, and competence will ever be foundational again to the way we conduct our public affairs. Or will we continue to require that truth bowl us over — actually threaten every area of life — before we believe it?

The question for the church in the United States is whether we will come out of this austere moment able to admit the role Catholics and their leaders played in electing and enabling a man who, far from being pro-life, has proven himself a distinct danger to life on several levels.

It is neither coincidence nor surprising that those who engage in fevered distortions of the truth in the political realm would have companions in the religion realm.

The combination is dangerous, and just how potentially destructive — not only of democratic processes and institutions but now of the body politic itself — is becoming all too clear. Are those bishops who reduced Catholic participation in the political process to a single issue, who tacitly approved when their culture-warrior minions delivered that message from countless pulpits, willing to take responsibility now for the sheer incompetence they helped put in place? If it profits not a man to give his soul for the world, how much worse for the church to hand over its integrity for a few conservative justices.

The consequences are enormous and have to do with much more than policy differences or even single-issue politics. As The Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson, recounting how Trump bragged about the ratings for his embarrassing afternoon "briefings," so aptly put it recently:

> Exploiting this type of tragedy in the cause of personal vanity reveals Trump's spirit to be a vast, trackless wasteland. Trump seems incapable of imagining and reflecting the fears, suffering and grief of his fellow citizens. We have witnessed the total failure of empathy in presidential leadership.

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There is a Catholic reckoning at hand. Catholics and their leaders who bought the single-issue strategy find themselves stuck in what once was a fun house now turned house of horrors, incongruously lashed to President Donald Trump, a tawdry community of mutual desperation. This place where the feints and mirrors were once enough in the dim light to convince the band of jesters that they were in control is becoming, in the cold light of truth, a national graveyard. The daily reality is a grim report of the spiraling number of sick and dying.

Behind Trump on the national stage these days are not members of his base inoculated against truth but people of sober accomplishment who find themselves having to work in a universe of sycophants. Trump has been forced in recent weeks to confront realities that until now he has been able to avoid or banish from his crimped universe: people of deep empathy and superior competence, forces he can't control, and bluster that is not only transparently silly but also dangerous.

Assertions no longer will suffice. The record is there for posterity. The man who ignored the experts, who took it on himself to label a deadly pandemic a "hoax," who said it would miraculously disappear, whose administration has yet to coordinate desperately needed supplies to states where governors keep telling the awful truth about what they face, that man keeps insisting he's done "a great job." The tough guy faces tough questions by screaming mindless insults at reporters and jumping in front of medical experts, preventing them from answering, knowing that they'll offer a correction to his inane narrative.

This awful moment has laid bare the high cost to the U.S. church of 30 years or more of accommodation to a culture of political expediency and an attempt to diminish the community of faith's responsibility to the common good. Single-issue voting relieved too many of us of the responsibility to engage deeper political and historical realities. The questions we're left with are urgent.

The reckoning is upon us.

This story appears in the **Coronavirus** feature series. View the full series.
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