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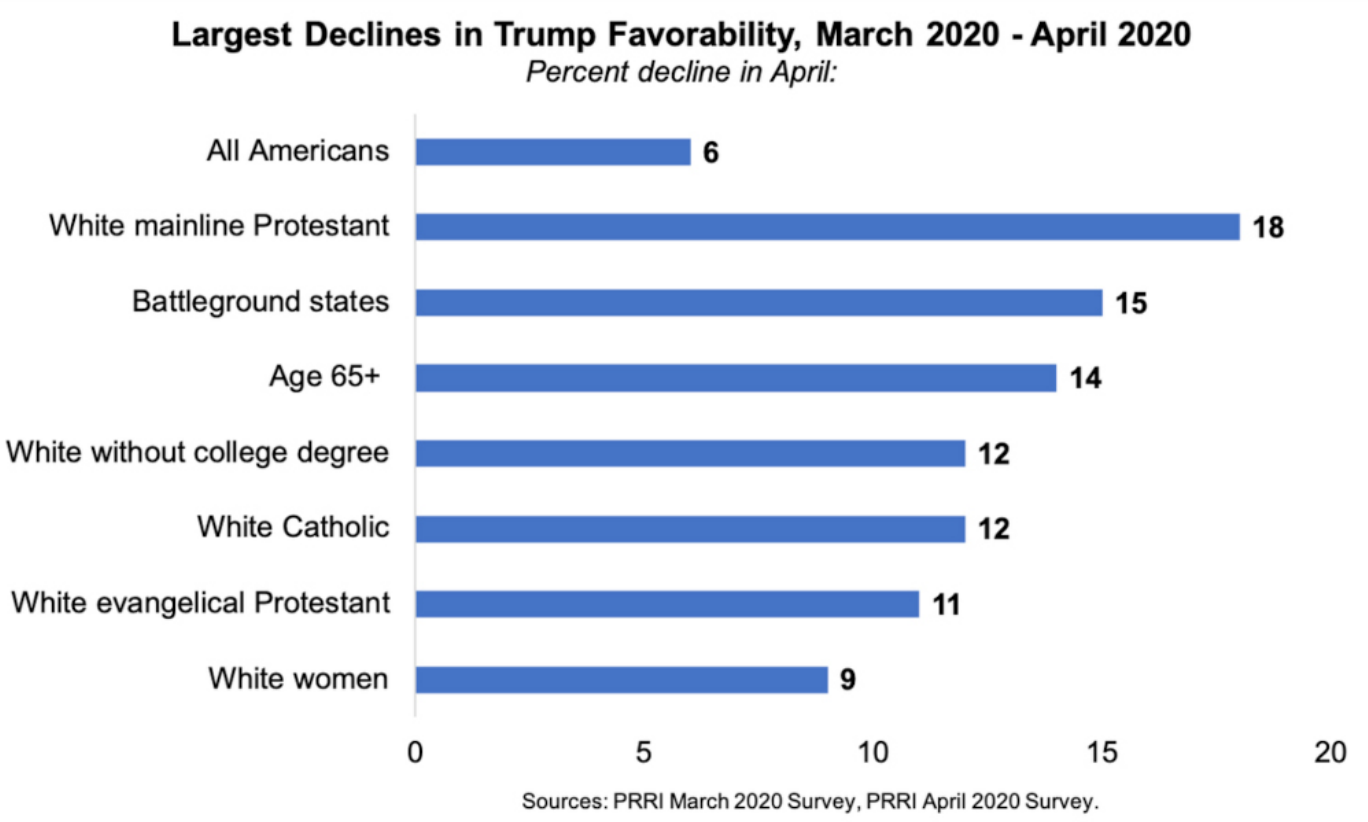

“Largest Declines in Trump Favorability, March 2020 - April 2020” Graphic courtesy of PRRI

by Catholic News Service

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President Donald Trump said he would continue to support issues vital to the Catholic Church, especially abortion, religious freedom and school choice, in a conference call with Catholic leaders and educators.

He also said he would seek federal financial support for Catholic schools as they confront the coronavirus pandemic.

Many schools across the country have sustained severe financial stresses since the pandemic emerged in the U.S. in February, according to the National Catholic Educational Association.

Crux, an online Catholic news organization, reported on the April 26 call after obtaining a recording of the event.

Trump described himself as the "best (president) in the history of the Catholic Church" to the 600 Catholic leaders and educators, according to the report.

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Throughout the call, Trump repeatedly returned to his support of efforts to stop abortion and school choice while saying that a Democratic presidency could lead to an opposition in the government to those Catholic concerns.

Among those on the call were New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Bishop Michael Barber of Oakland, California, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Catholic Education.

Educators identified as being on the call were Paul Escala and Elias Moo, superintendents of Catholic education in the archdioceses of Los Angeles and Denver, respectively.

None of those participants could be reached for comment. However, one participant, Mary Pat Donoghue, executive director of the Secretariat for Catholic Education at the U.S. bishops' conference, declined to comment in an email to Catholic News Service, saying the call was "off the record."

As he discussed his support of Catholic issues, Trump noted that Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson also were on the call.

Trump repeatedly stressed to the participants his commitment to pro-life cause, saying it has "been at a level that no other president has seen before, according to everybody."

In January, Trump became the first sitting president to address the annual March for Life in Washington, which protests the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion.

The president also reiterated his support for the Mexico City policy, which bars federal funding for nongovernmental organizations that provide abortion and opposition to the Johnson Amendment, which prohibits tax exempt organizations, including churches, from supporting or opposing political candidates.

The president's remarks lasted about 15 minutes before he fielded questions.

The topic of federal support to prop up Catholic schools was the primary concern expressed by participants. The need is particularly acute under the pandemic even though some schools have obtained forgivable Small Business Administration loans under the new Paycheck Protection Program.

The loans are primarily meant for entities with less than 500 employees, including nonprofits such as schools and churches, so they can keep staff employed for up to eight weeks. Catholic school administrators nationwide face major questions as they prepare for the new academic year, however, because of the potential loss of tuition from families whose wage-earners have suffered layoffs and the high expense of converting in-person classes to online learning.

Dolan was the first participant to speak, according to the Crux account. He welcomed the support of DeVos, Carson and Kellyanne Conway, a senior adviser to Trump, calling them "cherished allies in our passion for our beloved schools."

He stressed to Trump that the outlook for schools never "looked more bleak, but perhaps never has the outlook looked more promising given the energetic commitment that your administration has to our schools. We need you more than ever."



Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Oakland Bishop Michael Barber, chair of the U.S. bishops' committee of Catholic Education, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley are seen in this composite photo. (CNS composite; photos by Bob Roller, Paul Haring, Gregory A. Shemitz)

In response, Trump turned to his reelection campaign, saying the "situation coming up on Nov. 3, the likes of which have never been more important for the church."

He then said Democrats "want abortion."

"We did very well defending that during our last race with Hillary Clinton because she had it right up until the time of birth," he said. "We probably helped out the pro-life (effort) more than anything you can imagine.

"I hope that everyone gets out and votes and does what they have to do," he said in reference to the November election, warning that if he is defeated, "you're going to have a very different Catholic Church."

O'Malley continued the line of questioning related to schools, urging the president to support tuition assistance for families to enable them to send their children to Catholic schools.

"We need it now," he said. "It has to be done in a quick way that helps them to pay tuition."

Crux reported that Escala and Moo urged the president to pursue policies that support school choice.

After the call with Catholic leaders, Trump tweeted he planned to join the live stream of Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York on Sunday, and shared a link to the service. A chat alongside the live stream on YouTube attracted a bevy of political messages, with some writing as the service began "Blessings to President Trump," "Trump we love you" and "Trump 2020." Another message read "My beautiful President Trump" followed by a praying hands emoji. Others in the chat shared hashtags associated with QAnon, the far-right conspiracy group. Still others expressed exasperation with the political debate playing out alongside the in-process Mass.

"This is too political for me! We do NOT all like this president!" wrote one person.

"Holy Mass is NOT about Trump! Holy Mass is about CHRIST. Focus on Holy Mass," wrote another.

At the beginning of his homily, Dolan said "I've been advised that our former neighbor up the street is worshiping with us live stream. Welcome, Mr. President." He then jokingly asked a monsignor if he wanted to reshare the information for making online contributions.

"Mr. President, St. Paul in the Bible exhorts us to pray for our leaders, and that we do every Sunday. And in these trying days, especially as one nation under God, beseeching the almighty's guidance and strength upon you and your administration, as well as upon our state and local leadership," said Dolan, before asking the president to wish First Lady Melania Trump a happy birthday.

As Dolan preached, the political comments continued in the chat, with one relating the persecution of Jesus to treatment of Trump.

"*Thats why im here, Trump sent me*"

"*The first lady is Mr Trumps third wife lest you forget Fr Dolan.*"

"*Trump for Emperor!!*"

The New York cardinal later thanked Trump, along with other political leaders and health care professionals, "for working so hard to see that we can safely return to church as soon as safely possible."

Dolan continued his praise of the president Monday in a virtual appearance on the Fox News "Fox and Friends" show, saying "I'm in admiration of his leadership."

"I really salute his leadership. I salute the leadership here, too, of our governor and our mayor and everybody has really come through. But the president has seemed particularly sensitive to the, to what shall I say, the feelings of the religious community," he said.

At onset of the 10-minute segment, Dolan said he was "honored to be considered one of the friends of 'Fox and Friends' among you." The conversation focused on the financial impact of the pandemic on houses of worship. At one point the cardinal expressed his wish to hug co-host Ainsley Earhardt after she asked a question about the economic struggles facing Catholic schools.

"Like most families, your parish, this archdiocese kind of lives from paycheck to paycheck. And our paychceks are our Sunday collection, and they're not coming in," Dolan said.

The cardinal said he was particularly concerned about school enrollment in the fall, as families might weigh paying tuition against other costs and financial stresses.

"We are really worried about next year. Bravo, we've got heroic donors that have come through and we've got the promise of our leaders, and as I said, especially President Trump, who really showed a solicitude for Catholic schools, Catholic Charities, Catholic health care. Bravo."

[NCR staff writer Brian Roewe contributed to this report.]

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