Opinion
News
Guest Voices



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)



by Stephen Schneck

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Editor's note: *This article was originally published by U.S. Catholic magazine and then taken down without notice. With the author's permission, we are republishing the article in full with its original headline. The article was updated on May 10 at 8:35 p.m. to correct Ben Carson's title.*

The Trump campaign is making a surprisingly big play for white Catholic voters — a key bloc to win the Rustbelt. Earlier this month, originally planned as an event for Milwaukee, the Trump campaign livestreamed the rollout of Catholics for Trump. Outside groups friendly to President Donald Trump have been engaged to micro-target and "geo-track" Catholics at the parish level in the upper Midwest.

Recently, top level surrogate, Attorney General William Barr, was deployed on a call to religious leaders, including Catholic clergy and bishops, to stoke concerns about those who might use the COVID-19 virus to keep religious services and religious schools closed.

Nothing is wrong with this. Both campaigns should recognize the importance of these voters, many of whom swung from supporting Barack Obama to supporting Trump in the last election. As a Catholic, though, I worry about how my church will react to this outreach.

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Case in point, on April 25, Trump along with Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson had a call with Catholic leaders. Several recordings of the call were made and transcripts were taken.

Ostensibly about Catholic schools, in reality that call was a campaign event. The president preened that "he was the best in history for the Catholic Church." He repeatedly claimed dire consequences for Catholics were he not re-elected, saying that Democrats "want abortion to the end of the ninth month and beyond," citing Hillary Clinton and Virginia's Democrat Gov. Ralph Northam.

The president then promised in regard to helping Catholic schools that "We'll be helping you out more than you know." And, lest anyone on the call was unclear about his ask, the president touted his opposition to the Johnson Amendment that blocks tax exempt institutions from endorsing political candidates, and pointedly insisted that institutions like the Catholic Church can now "express your views very strongly" and that Nov. 3 has "never been more important for the church." (Aside: Mr. President, the Johnson Amendment has NOT been repealed.)

Fair enough Trump; it's an election year, the white Catholic vote is up for grabs and politics is politics. My concern is not about you; it's about my church. By tradition, in keeping with longstanding United States Conference of Catholic Bishops guidelines and in keeping with papal directives and canon law, the church and its officials should avoid the appearance of partisanship.

Long after the point where it was obvious that the president was orchestrating a campaign event, four bishops also spoke on the call: Oakland Bishop Michael Barber, who heads the U.S. bishops' conference committee on Catholic education, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez, the current president of the U.S. bishops' conference, and Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley.

O'Malley and Gomez remained carefully neutral in their remarks, but none of the bishops noted any of the dozens of social justice concerns that the church has with Trump administration policies — policies affecting poverty, refugees, immigrants, climate change, racial justice and so on.

Less neutral was the over-the-top bonhomie of Dolan, mutually backslapping with the president, and even reiterating his praise for the president on Fox News, subsequently. Barber gushed that he looked forward to continue partnering with the administration, thanked the president for his appointment of Supreme Court Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh and praised DeVos for being such a "great ally to Catholics."

> My question is: What must Dolan's and Barber's brother bishops do to fix this mess? What should be the statement from Gomez, the U.S. bishops' conference president?
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Let there be Catholics for Trump and Catholics for Biden and Catholics for none-of-the-above. Let there be righteous engagement from my church on issues like abortion, immigration, climate change, school choice and racial justice. But, let's not see any hints of partisanship among those in Roman collars or those in bishops' mitres.

Pope John Paul II warned against clergy involvement in partisan elections. Pope Benedict XVI instructed that politics is the duty of the laity — not the clergy.

I do not think that Dolan and Barber went rogue. Perhaps they naively thought the call would not be recorded. Perhaps they were caught up in the president's well-known sense of humor. He is a funny guy. I'm sure they did not intend to give the appearance of partisanship. Yet, they did, and did so scandalously.

My question is: What must Dolan's and Barber's brother bishops do to fix this mess? What should be the statement from Gomez, the U.S. bishops' conference president?

It's clear that Trump, floundering in an election year and watching his poll numbers drop, desperately wants the endorsement of the Catholic Church. He can't have it. Bishops must leave politics to the laity.

[Stephen Schneck is executive director of Franciscan Action Network.]