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by NCR Editorial Staff

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NCR's recent [profile] of U.S. Attorney General William Barr quoted his now-famous 2019 speech at the University of Notre Dame, in which he railed against secularism's attack on the "traditional moral order," an attack he believed caused, as he put it, "immense suffering, wreckage, and misery" and "virtually every measure of social pathology."

The antidote to secularism, [Barr said], is religion, especially the Judeo-Christian moral system that promotes moral discipline and virtue. Thus the need to protect religious liberty — seemingly Barr's ultimate cause.

Barr grew up in a Catholic home, attended Catholic grammar school and in adulthood has been affiliated with a number of conservative Catholic organizations,

all of which surely formed him in the morals and virtues about which he waxed so eloquently at Notre Dame.

Oh, that we could see some of that moral discipline and virtue reflected in the decisions made by Barr's Department of Justice.

Last month's tear-gassing of peaceful protesters in Washington D.C. — personally ordered by Barr to make way for Donald Trump's Bible photo-op — seems almost tame compared to last week's video from Portland, Oregon, where federal agents, clad in camouflage, forced a peaceful protester into an unmarked minivan.

Such tactics are reminiscent of dictatorship, not a democracy.

Yet Barr not only defended them, he has announced a "surge" of the Justice Department's "Operation Legend," which is sending federal law enforcement to quell violence in the nation's cities — primarily "blue" Democratic cities.

It's all part of a reelection plan to paint Trump as a "law and order" leader, in response to largely peaceful protests that have erupted over racial injustice, including the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, who pleaded for his mother while an officer knelt on his neck for eight minutes.

On Wednesday, Barr called the protests after Floyd's murder "extreme."

Barr graduated with highest honors from George Washington Law School, so he should be aware that arresting citizens without specific probable cause is unconstitutional. The Portland protester in the video was released shortly after being detained in a federal facility; a later statement by Customs and Border Protection claimed the Portland protester in the video was suspected of attacking federal agents or property.

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These frightening tactics are just the latest in the erosion of true justice under Barr's leadership in the DOJ. Barr, who is supposed to be the top lawyer for the American people, instead seems more focused on providing legal cover for a president for whom legal troubles — or potential legal troubles — are an almost daily occurrence.

When Trump wishes the alleged accomplice of child sexual abuser Jeffrey Epstein "well," as he did in this week's press conference, all but the most naive or politically partisan read the comment as the nod and wink that she'll be taken care of, even if she perjures herself. It's the same nod and wink that Roger Stone and Michael Flynn got.

With so many perversions of justice from the Barr DOJ, it's hard to differentiate the horrors. But one move is a direct contradiction of Catholic teaching.

The same week that federal agents flooded Portland, the Department of Justice, under Barr, resumed capital punishment, putting to death three men, including one whom his priest spiritual director described as a "sincere, practicing Catholic." They were the first federal executions in nearly two decades.

Barr moved to resume federal executions last year, by issuing a "protocol addendum" that replaced the controversial three-drug procedure previously used in federal executions with a single drug.

More than 1,000 religious leaders, including several Catholic bishops, signed a July 7 letter urging Trump and Barr to halt the executions. "As our country grapples with the COVID 19 pandemic, an economic crisis, and systemic racism in the criminal legal system, we should be focused on protecting and preserving life, not carrying out executions," the letter said.

Perhaps because the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and its Committee on Pro-Life Activities — usually so quick with a public statement whenever abortion is in the news — have yet to say anything about the resumption of the death penalty for federal prisoners, Barr correctly assumes that the killing of prisoners is not a priority for our bishops.

Yet Barr has been a Knights of Columbus member since 1984 and previously served on the board for the Opus Dei-run Catholic Information Center, whose bookstore surely carries the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

That catechism, updated in 2018 by Pope Francis to reflect changes begun under St. John Paul II, teaches, "in the light of the Gospel, that 'the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person.' "

In his Notre Dame speech, Barr preached about how Christianity teaches the importance of "micro-morality," in which "we transform the world by focusing on our own personal morality and transformation," he said.

Barr has politicized the Department of Justice so that it has chipped away at democratic freedoms and rights, all while protecting a culture of corruption under one of the most immoral presidents in history.

At the same time, while waving the banner of conservative, culture-war Catholicism, he has personally instigated the anti-life move to resume federal executions.

He may be right about that need for morality, virtue and transformation.

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