News



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, listens to a speaker during the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore Nov. 12, 2019. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Lucy Grindon

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In unusually direct terms for an American church leader, Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, publicly criticized President Donald Trump during a July 31 webinar.

"For this president to call himself pro-life, and for anybody to back him because of claims of being pro-life, is almost willful ignorance. He is so much anti-life because he is only concerned about himself, and he gives us every, every, every indication of that," Stowe said.

Though the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops often criticizes Trump administration policies, especially those concerning immigration and environmental protection, Stowe's comment was one of the sharper criticisms a Catholic bishop has made of Trump himself.

The webinar, on the topic of the church's future after 2020, was hosted by the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs, or ICMICA-Pax Romana, a global lay community of Catholic intellectuals.

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"Pope Francis has given us a great definition of what pro-life means," Stowe said at the webinar. "He basically tells us we can't claim to be pro-life if we support the separation of children from their parents at the U.S. border, if we support exposing people at the border to COVID-19 because of the facilities that they're in, if we support denying people who have need for adequate health care access to health care, if we keep people from getting the housing or the education that they need, we cannot call ourselves pro-life." (As of Aug. 6, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement had reported 4,192 COVID-19 cases among the people in its custody, 917 of which are currently under "isolation or monitoring," and 3 COVID-19-related detainee deaths.)

Trump has long sought to win over Catholic voters by touting his support for the pro-life movement. In remarks broadcast to the crowd at the 2018 March for Life in Washington, he said, "Every unborn child is a precious gift from God."

But for Stowe, being truly pro-life must include efforts towards racial, social and environmental justice. "We have to be concerned for the unborn children, it's foundational for us," Stowe said. But, he added, "our understanding of pro-life has to be the vision that was described as the seamless garment vision." That vision gained traction after a 1983 speech by the late Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.



Screenshot of Bishop John Stowe during the July 31 webinar (NCR photo)

The other two speakers on the webinar panel were Shannen Dee Williams, the Albert LePage assistant professor of history at Villanova University, and Michael Bayer, the former director of evangelization and adult formation at St. Clement Parish in Chicago. Imagining the future of the church, they also addressed the importance of racial and social justice advocacy.

"The church has to take leading roles in campaigns that are working to protect Black lives [and] working to dismantle white supremacy," said Williams. The church, she

said, needs to address inequities in health care access and outcomes, end mass incarceration and secure police reform and accountability.

"Where are our hierarchy on this? Why aren't we planning a million-person march in Washington, D.C. for immigrants?" asked Bayer. "I've been in those marches protesting the assault on pre-born life. Where are our mass Washington, D.C. [efforts to] show up and protest the assault on Black and brown life?"

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