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Former Sen. Rick Santorum is pictured in this screenshot of a video talk for the Napa Institute's 2020 summer conference. (NCR photo)



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August 19, 2020

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"Finding Hope in the New America" served as the theme of this year's Napa Institute summer conference — a high-dollar gathering that brings together conservative Catholic philanthropists, lay leaders and high-ranking prelates — but in the more than 40 sessions of the 2020 virtual conference, its titular virtue of hope appeared to be in short supply.

Fear, instead, proved to be a dominant theme throughout this year's talks, most of which were pre-recorded and posted online Aug. 14-15, as participants were warned of the potential "hijacking of the civil rights movement" as racial tensions persist throughout the country, and the rise of big government, as evidenced by certain measures taken to fight the spread of the coronavirus.

This year's speaker lineup included papal biographer George Weigel, Australian Cardinal George Pell, FOCUS founder Curtis Martin and former Sen. Rick Santorum, many of whom warned, in the words of Weigel, that "America has been told a false story about itself" by secular elites and that Christians are increasingly under siege in the public square.

Weigel encouraged attendees to be prepared to play "good legal defense" in the years to come, especially in the fight for religious liberty. Similarly, Santorum said that in order to protect the "fragility of freedom," Catholics must possess the same level of passion as "Antifa and other leftist organizations and atheistic organizations."

Founded in 2010, the Napa Institute takes its inspiration from its former ecclesial advisor, the recently retired Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia, who in the article "Catholics and the Next America" warned against the growing threat of secularization.

In response, over the last decade, Catholics have gathered every summer at the posh Meritage Resort and Spa, a property of Napa's co-founder Tim Busch, for the three-fold mission of participating in liturgies, faith formation and fraternity, drawing crowds of around 700 participants.

Fraternity proved especially challenging this year, as participants who normally shell out more than $2,000 per person, in addition to hotel rates of some $500 per night

and are accustomed to evening receptions with free-flowing wine from the Busch family-owned Trinitas Cellars and accompanying cigars, were forced to tune in on their laptops or home televisions.

The price tag for this year's event, only $189, was considerably lower than past years, but one could select a watch party package for $1,000. Those opting for the latter were shipped a case of Trinitas wine and cigars. Busch noted that he was told of one such gathering in northern Virginia that had 75 individuals in attendance (although he did not mention whether it was in compliance with the state's guidelines on large group gatherings).

Busch was also still able to hawk his winery's signature blends through commercials during the event. Having already made separate wines for Popes Benedict and Francis, this fall he is set to release a new blend: "The two popes."



Speakers participate in a pre-recorded panel introduction that played during the Napa Institute's 2020 summer conference. Pictured in this screenshot, from left, are: John Meyer, Jesuit Fr. Robert Spitzer, Tim Busch and Fr. Ambrose Criste. (NCR photo)

A 'hijacking' of civil rights

While Napa Institute attendees are accustomed to enjoying the California sunshine, the closest this year's attendees could get to that experience was through the pre-recorded panel introductions from Busch, Napa president Jesuit Fr. Robert Spitzer, executive director John Meyer, and emcee Fr. Ambrose Criste, filmed in EWTN's Orange County studios.

These four half-hour sessions set the stage for talk from the other presenters with the quartet offering their major takeaways and highlighting overlapping themes — among them being a condemnation of the Black Lives Matter organization as atheistic and Marxist, and a warning from Criste that "it's probably not about race at all if you dig deep."

In a talk titled "American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time," Georgetown University government professor Joshua Mitchell warned that America has relocated its religion to the realm of politics, where identity is at the center of all major decisions and debates.

"God is nowhere to be found in the identity politics accounting scheme. Neither is forgiveness, which would erase the scores all together and leave us with no score to settle," he said, specifically noting that "white heterosexual men" must bear the guilt of all past transgressions.

While he offered the caveat that he was not saying that straight white men are all innocent, he said that "whatever the law may say about our innocence, the presumption of identity politics is that man, or rather the white heterosexual man, is guilty."

"This is a dangerous reversal of legal norms that the Anglo-American tradition took centuries to develop and take hold," he warned. "All others — women, Blacks, Hispanics, LGBTQ persons — have their sins of omission or commission covered over by scapegoating this group."

Another talk by Louis Brown, executive director of the Christ Medicus Foundation, offered a sweeping condemnation of a "culture of death" in America — one in which he said 19 million African American babies are aborted each year, police officers are all demonized, and rioting has led to a "hijacking of the civil rights movement."

The New York Times' "1619 Project" was also the subject of several presenters' criticisms. Princeton University historian Allen C. Guelzo labeled the initiative's efforts to date the American founding to the year that the first African slaves arrived

in the Virginia colony (rather than the historical dating of 1776) is an "egregious" overreach that is "long on passion, short on reality."

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He also warned that the project "leaves us with a suspicion that capitalism is somehow tainted by slavery," which has contributed to the embrace of socialism by younger Americans.

Weigel also lambasted the project, adding that "the effects of this distorted telling of the American story are everywhere. They are unmistakable and they are ubiquitous." Another speaker, Robert Woodson Sr., who leads a counter-initiative, "1776 Unites," said that the "1619 Project," as well as the current backlash over the recent death of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man killed by a police officer in Minnesota in May, are both examples of the "the left" exploiting the country's "racist past."

Woodson said that as a Black conservative, he was supportive of government intervention in the 1960s, but said that liberals now try to "convince America that the problems facing inner city Blacks today are a consequence of the legacy of slavery and discrimination." He said he rejects the idea of systemic racism, telling attendees "I don't know what that means," and said that the United States "needs to be defined by the promise it has provided."

Church politics

While past Napa conferences have spotlighted more internal ecclesial debates, such as recent Vatican synods and the clergy abuse scandals, only a handful of this year's keynote speakers discussed in-house church affairs.

Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron used his remarks to castigate Catholic traditionalists who have questioned the legitimacy of the Second Vatican Council.

"The council is settled teaching," he said, saying now is the time to get "on with the great work of Vatican II." He went on to lament the questioning of an ecumenical council and related disparagement of Pope Francis, particularly as is evidenced on social media, as a decline in the state of Catholic conversation.



Cardinal George Pell is pictured in a screenshot of his interview during the Napa Institute's 2020 summer conference, which was held virtually this year (NCR photo)

Pell, who in April was released from prison after Australia's highest court dismissed sex abuse convictions against him, told attendees that during his 13 months behind bars, he busied himself with daily journaling and keeping track of both world news and church affairs.

The Australian cardinal specifically mentioned monitoring the latest happenings with Brexit, describing himself as a "big supporter" of the United Kingdom's efforts to leave the European Union, and said that while he was initially concerned with last October's Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican, "as far as I can see there wasn't too much damage done."

Pell also thanked the American audience for support he received while in prison from "many, many friends" in the United States, including letters he received from Cardinals Timothy Dolan, Roger Mahony, Edwin O'Brien and Raymond Burke.

He encouraged attendees to remain steadfast in the face of "difficult times for the church," saying that the global church depends on the church in the United States.

"The more you adapt to the world, the faster the Catholic Church goes out of business," he said.



Cardinal George Pell, left, is pictured in a screenshot of an interview conducted by Marylin Rodrigues of the Catholic Weekly, for the Napa Institute's 2020 summer conference. (NCR photo)

'When will we speak out?'

While the inside baseball of church politics may have taken a backseat this year, many of the talks offered similar refrains that encouraged Catholics to be engaged in the country's political life, lest they be squeezed out of it.

"President Trump has been absolutely fearless on life," Roger Severino, the director of the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

told attendees. "He's a champion for the unborn. The way he speaks about life, it comes from the heart and he's followed up with policies."

Looking ahead to this fall's election, Santorum, a regular commentator on CNN, told attendees that he hopes church leaders are quick to call out politicians who disagree with church teaching on abortion or marriage, but doesn't want them "to get involved in agriculture programs and economic development projects and the morality of all of those things.

"I think that's highly problematic and inappropriate. I think too often the bishops' conference gets wrapped around the axle on issues that frankly that are not moral absolutes and are areas of prudential judgment," he warned.

"And I frankly think they should stay away from those things. The more narrow focused, clear issues that are unambiguous teachings of the church is the lane that the church has the most authority, and as a result has the most persuasion," he continued. "Once they go afield on a variety of other issues like nuclear proliferation treaties, you just weaken the soup and make it ineffective."

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In one of only three talks delivered by women, Mary Hasson, who directs the Catholic Women's Forum at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, told attendees that the modern world has rejected the significance of the body, as is evidenced by current debates over abortion and transgender rights.

"Because women are so confused about who we are, men are very confused about who they are, as well, because feminism attacked this idea of masculinity as well," she lamented, saying that the sexual revolution has been in large part due to the fact that society has "lost sight of God."

"In rejecting motherhood in the embrace of the pill and abortion as the means to autonomy and equality, women became alienated from themselves," she said.

Tim Gray, president of the Augustine Institute, encouraged attendees to understand their citizenship as central to their identity, one that is ultimately in heaven, but requires boldness in the present world.

"Our role is to make the American project faithful to God," he said.

"We cannot capitulate to a secular mob," Gray said, warning that Christians must "stand our ground" in order to avoid further persecution. "Are we willing to stand up to say that marriage is between a man and a woman? Are we willing to say Merry Christmas?"

"If we don't speak up at the risk of losing our jobs or at the risk of making people uncomfortable, when will we speak out?" Gray asked attendees.

Ordinary versus extraordinary means

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of numerous conferences and events throughout the spring and summer, the Napa Institute released a video in May insisting its summer conference scheduled for July would continue with an in-person meeting.

"What an opportunity for us to come together as the Catholic family to share friendship and to participate in beautiful liturgies," Busch said at the time. "This conference will give us something to look forward to and we've taken precautions that it will be safer than ever." Yet when California's Gov. Gavin Newsom instituted new guidelines for large gatherings in July, the conference was forced to shift to a virtual format.

Even so, throughout the sessions, panelists warned that the closing of churches — and even that of many businesses and events — during the pandemic were an example of the threat of big government, which Catholics could expect more of if progressives succeed.

"If you saw any hint of what's to come, look at what happened when COVID happened," Santorum warned. "You saw real fear in the hearts of Americans. And with that, a tremendous increase in government asserting power and authority over people. And people complied. Now, with good reason in many cases because of the concern of the pandemic, but … one of the most interesting things is that some of the most popular politicians in America are those that are most controlling, the ones who 'want' to protect people by asserting the government's mandate."

Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, used his talk to apply the traditional language of Catholic moral theology of "ordinary versus extraordinary means" —

often applied when it comes to end of life care — to the pandemic.

"Do we have a moral obligation to shut down our society, require people to stay at home, put employees out of work, send businesses into bankruptcy, impair the food supply chain, and prevent worshippers from going to church?" he asked. "I would say not. That would be imposing unduly burdensome and extraordinary means. While some people may voluntarily adopt such means, only ordinary means that are not unduly burdensome are morally required to preserve life both on the part of individuals as well as society as a whole."

Yet if "Finding Hope in the New America" featured warnings that freedom can quickly be taken away and that the American project is a fragile one, Busch did offer his own declaration of questionable optimism for viewers at home.

"I'm not a scientist but reading all the scientists and so forth, we in America are nearing herd immunity and we may be through this medical problem late September, October," he said, despite medical reports to the contrary.

"The biggest problem is going to be, do we believe it?

While the Napa Institute's fall conference on "Woke Capitalism" has also shifted to a virtual format, Busch assured participants that next summer he looks forward to welcoming them back to Napa Valley.

"We're just about through this," he assured them. "And I think these lockdowns are going to be coming to an end in the weeks to come."

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A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 4-17, 2020** print issue under the headline: Christians under siege according to virtual Napa conference.