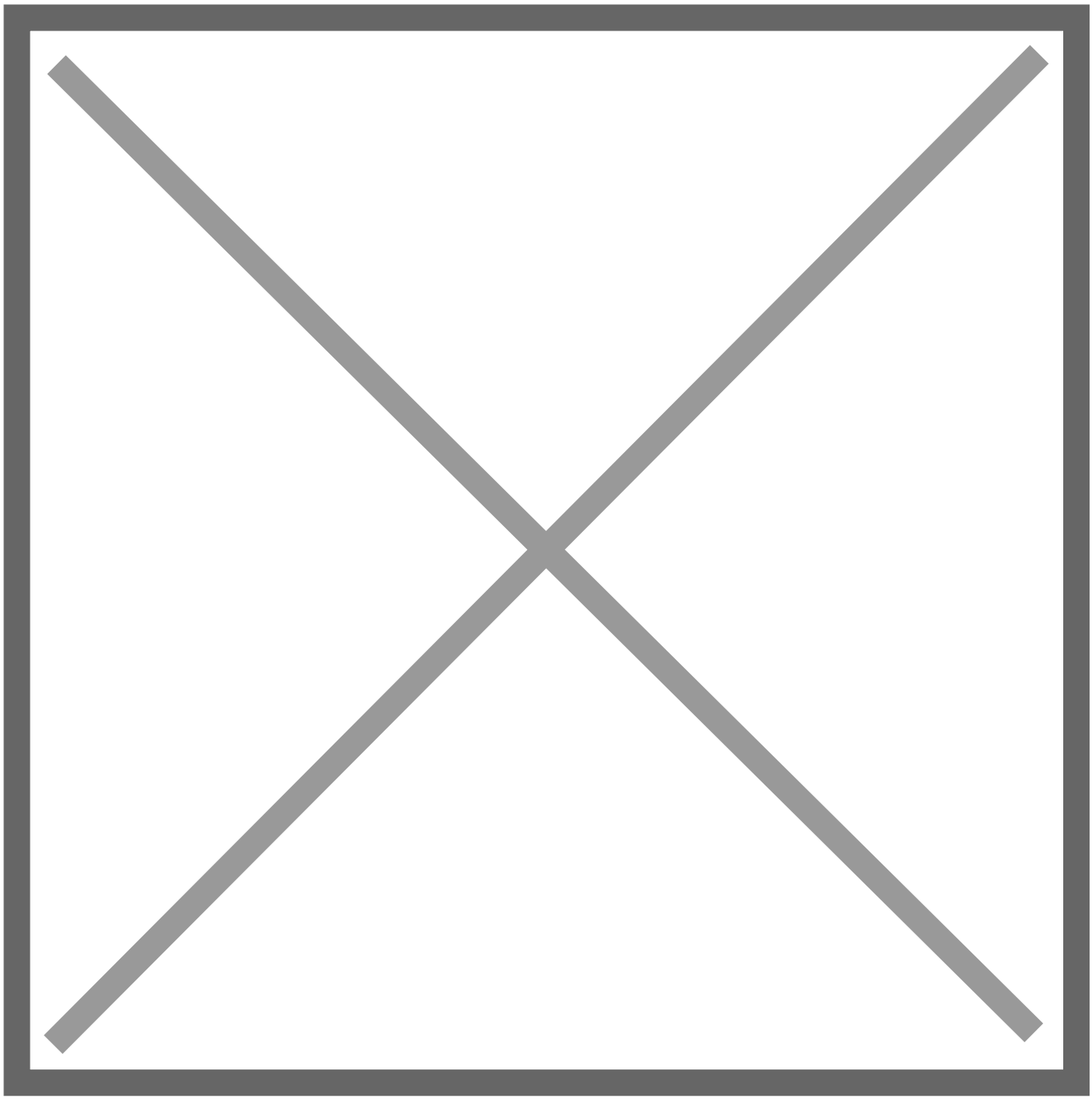
News



John Carr, director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, takes part in a forum on economic justice hosted by the Jesuits of Arizona and the Monsignor Edward J. Ryle Fund Jan. 6, 2015, at Brophy College Preparatory in Phoenix. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)



by Christopher White

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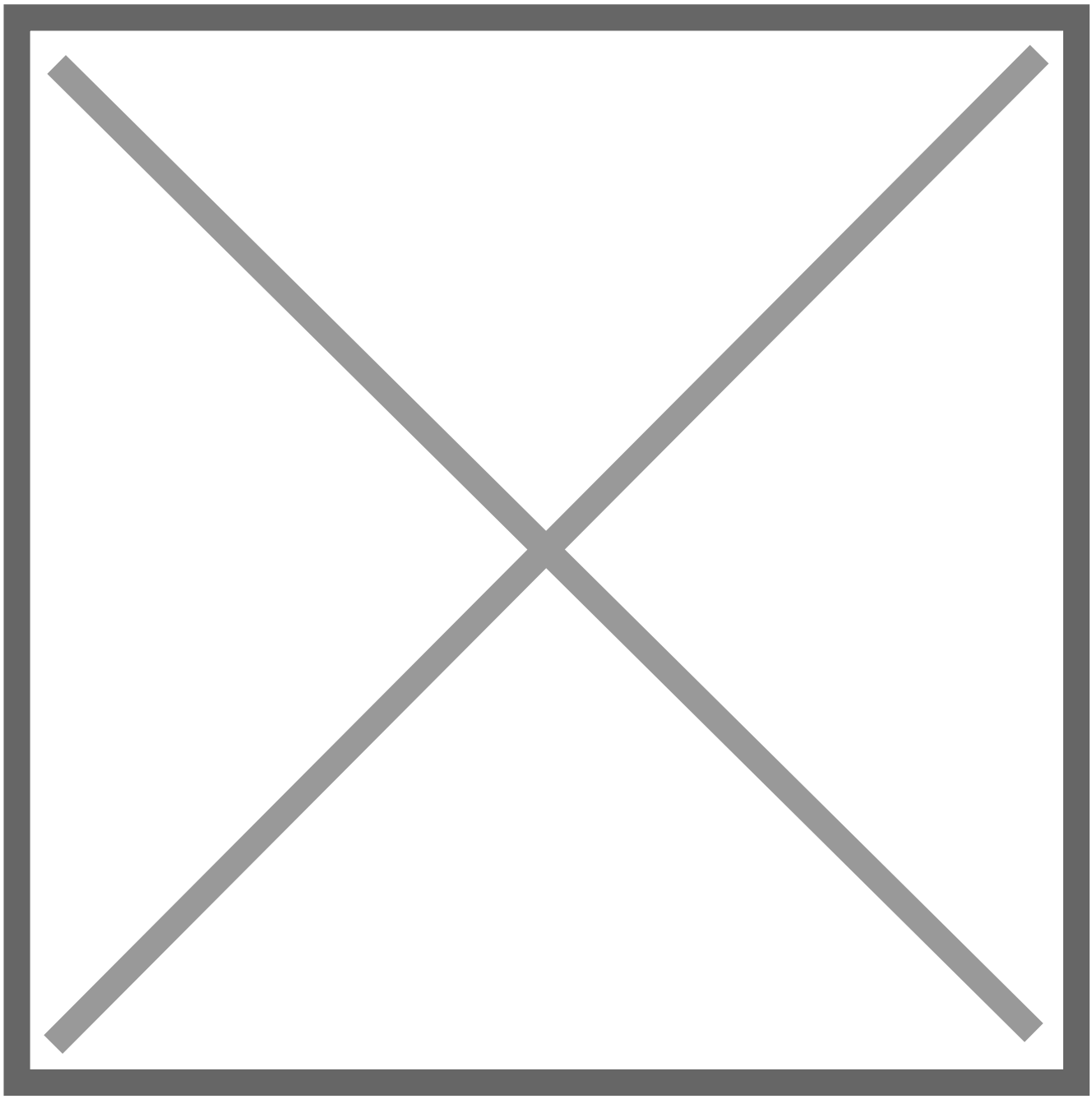
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When the U.S. Catholic bishops updated their official voting guide ahead of the 2008 presidential election, one bishop suggested striking language from the document that named racism as an "intrinsic evil."

"We'll never have a president who says racist things," the bishop said, recalls John Carr, who was a part of the discussion.

While Carr told NCR that the suggestion was made "in good faith" and sincere belief that the country had made serious progress on fighting racism, it's now that very issue that is one of the primary reasons Carr penned an essay saying there are "morally grave" reasons why he's voting for former Vice President Joe Biden over President Donald Trump.

"Mr. Trump demonizes immigrants, fans the flames of race and division, refuses to denounce racist groups or actions and seeks to divide the country by overt appeals to racial fears. Mr. Biden condemns racism and seeks national healing, speaks for voting rights and against systemic racism," wrote Carr. "At this moment of national reckoning on racial injustice and clear disparities in the impact of the coronavirus crisis, electing a president who will fight racism, not exacerbate it, is a moral imperative for me."



John Carr, director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University and an abuse survivor, speaks during a Feb. 1, 2019, panel discussion at the Leadership Roundtable's Catholic Partnership Summit in Washington to put forth possible solutions to the church's sex abuse crisis. (CNS/Ralph Alswang, courtesy of Leadership Roundtable)

John Carr may not be a household name for most U.S. Catholics in the pews but for the church's bishops and those following any issue at the intersection of faith and

public life, for a quarter century as the top policy advisor for the U.S. bishops, he's been a dominant force working on everything from the Affordable Care Act to the church's response to the clergy abuse crisis to food stamps and paid family leave.

In his essay published in America magazine on Sept. 17, Carr recalls working as a young staffer and helping to write the first voting guide adopted by U.S. bishops in 1975 ahead of the 1976 election. Eventually the document morphed into its current version known as "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," and Carr likes to use the now much quoted line from the smash Broadway musical "Hamilton" that he was "in the room where it happened," for almost every iteration of the document over 12 presidential election cycles.

Not once in that time has Carr — who describes himself as "politically homeless" and faults the Democratic Party for their "abortion extremism" and the Republican Party for their disregard for migrants and the poor — ever publicly said how he intends to vote.

Until now.

"Racism and character are the decisive issues for me," he told NCR of his decision to go public this election. "The stakes are so high," he said, noting that the country is facing crises on four fronts: economic, racial justice, climate and in character.

A sense of "the common good is disappearing," said Carr.

> "People are throwing around the principles of our faith and the moral criteria of faithful citizenship in a way to simply score political points."
>
> —John Carr
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After leaving the bishops' conference, Carr founded the Initiative for Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University where he also teaches undergraduates. Given that he spends his days as a Catholic layperson encouraging others to participate in public life, he felt he should practice what he preaches and speak out.

"I'm not a priest, I'm not a bishop and I'm not a church official anymore," he said.

Yet since his retirement in 2012, Carr says it's been especially disappointing to see a document that he first proposed the bishops draft and helped retool every four years become used as a partisan tool and reduced to a single issue.

"People are throwing around the principles of our faith and the moral criteria of faithful citizenship in a way to simply score political points," he says.

"The greatest controversy concerned whether the statements adequately reflected distinctions among issues and priorities among different moral claims. 'Faithful Citizenship' was criticized on the one hand for making opposition to abortion the defining criterion for voting and on the other for minimizing abortion's moral gravity by including it in a list alongside other election issues. Both could not be true, and neither claim was accurate," he writes in the original America essay.

Carr remains an apologist for "Faithful Citizenship," telling NCR that "while it's too long, it has provided a moral framework that has been useful to pastors and people for 12 elections."



John Carr, director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, speaks during a 23-hour prayer vigil June 29, 2017, on Capitol Hill in Washington. The vigil focused on preserving Medicaid and was organized after the Senate delayed a vote on the Better Care Reconciliation Act, its health care reform bill. (CNS/Jaclyn Lippelmann)

Ahead of this current election, the U.S. bishops voted last November not to update the document but to instead write a new introductory letter to better reflect the priorities of Pope Francis. The decision not to provide an overhaul of the full document was already controversial among some bishops, and adding to the contentious debate surrounding it was a vote to reject including a full passage from Pope Francis' recently published apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate* that enumerates a range of justice issues that Catholic voters should consider. Further, language was adopted that said "the threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority," again inciting criticism that the document was too narrow in its scope.

Carr is one of those critics who says that the language of "preeminent priority" is an "incomplete and overly narrow moral criterion."

"The priority should be human life and dignity," he told NCR, which he believes would be more expansive and better reflect Pope Francis' approach to political life. "It's a very rare document that can make Pope Francis boring," he added, with the implication being that the latest version of "Faithful Citizenship" had accomplished just that.

When the bishops voted to adopt the language of "preeminent priority," it was suggested by Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, with the justification that "we are at a unique moment with the upcoming election cycle to make a real challenge to *Roe* v. *Wade*, given the possible changes to the Supreme Court."

Carr, whose essay was published prior to the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, told NCR that despite wanting to see an end to abortion in this country, the open seat on the court hasn't changed his calculus or how he intends to vote.

He said that the current efforts to rush to fill Ginsburg seat has "in some ways, reinforced my sense of homelessness."

> "Supreme Court fights bring out the worst in all of us."
>
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"Supreme Court fights bring out the worst in all of us," said Carr. "They become symbolic battles between the extremes that diminish politics, diminish the courts, and in some ways, diminish the church."

He also thinks that for those who believe that Trump's court picks will be the silver bullet that pro-lifers have been seeking in overturning *Roe* v. *Wade*, they may be disappointed.

"When *Roe* was decided by all men, mostly Republican appointees, Joe Biden was a pro-lifer and Ronald Reagan was pro-choice," he said. "Abortion has become a litmus test without really changing substantially. People project onto nominees all of their hopes and their fears when we should be considering whether they will be good judges or not."

Carr, who grew up Catholic in Minnesota — in what he describes as a "mixed marriage" with a mother who came from committed Republicans involved in state politics and a father whose family, also involved in state politics, were "die-hard Democrats" — says that being Catholic should make it difficult to ally oneself with a particular party.

"I learned at an early age that you can act on our faith in different ways," he said.

Yet in surveying the country ahead of this presidential contest, he cites the 200,000 Americans dead from the coronavirus, African Americans being killed by law enforcement officers, the reinstatement of the federal death penalty and the disproportionate health and economic disparities people of color are facing due the pandemic, and is quick to reject the notion that either party is sufficiently pro-life.



President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden are seen during their respective 2020 nominating conventions. (CNS composite/Photos by Carlos Barria, Reuters; Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)

While he's casting his vote for Biden in this election, he believes that Catholics who do likewise still need to be willing to challenge a potential Biden administration.

"If people like me vote for Biden because of who he is and what he can do despite his position on abortion, we should be clear there's no mandate to wipe out the Hyde Amendment and remove all abortion restrictions or to impose requirements on Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services that make it impossible for them to serve the poor," he says.

"The test for faithful citizens is not whether you're willing to challenge your adversaries, it's whether you're willing to challenge your friends," he said.

"Where have Catholic Republicans been who say, 'Extreme immigration policies and racist rhetoric doesn't represent me'?" he asks. "I think that's the test. Part of the

reason I'm homeless is that we're not called to be cheerleaders or chaplains. We've got to challenge ourselves and both parties."

Last spring when President Donald Trump convened a call of Catholic leaders — including Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, and U.S. bishops' president Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles — under the stated auspices of aiding Catholic education during the pandemic, he turned it into a pitch for his reelection, telling them that he was the best president in the history of the Catholic Church.

"I really regret that they were on that phone call because I think they were used whether they intended to be or not," Carr told NCR. "I think there's a real danger for religious leaders to be used and that danger is growing in Washington."

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Looking back on his time at the bishops' conference, Carr takes pride in his work of "building bridges between the social justice and pro-life camps" within the church. Yet while he says he doesn't dare tell anyone how they must vote in this election, he remains deeply skeptical that voters throwing their support behind Trump over abortion have chosen a strategy that will help the movement long term.

"If you were to choose the person least likely to persuade people to join the pro-life movement, it would be an old white guy who treats women terribly, treats immigrants and people of color terribly and wants to cut health care," he told NCR. "Trump, maybe short term has resulted in some victories for the pro-life cause, which I share, but long term he is terrible trouble. Ultimately we're going to have to persuade people rather than use the force of law to protect life."

Carr also cites Trump's interview with EWTN in August where he describes the pro-life cause as being "your big thing," referring to Catholics. The "relationship is transactional," he says.

While some priests and bishops have taken to social media in recent weeks to tout that you can't be a faithful Catholic and vote for a Democrat — and even used "Faithful Citizenship" to bolster their argument, Carr's reply is direct: "Integrity and character was a part of the document 46 years ago."

"It has always been a part of the criterion,'' he tells NCR, "and in my judgment, it has never been more important of a criteria for Catholic voters."

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This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 16-29, 2020** print issue under the headline: John Carr backing Biden.