News



Jeanné Lewis at the Commitment March on Washington 2020. Lewis, a Catholic, is running for city council in Washington, D.C. (Provided photo)



by John Gehring

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As the presidential election heads into a final sprint, Catholic voters remain at the top of the news cycle, and confirmation hearings for President Trump's Supreme Court pick, the former University of Notre Dame law professor Amy Coney Barrett, took place last week in Washington. While the media and pundit class are most focused on white Catholics in battleground states — where Trump eked out narrow 2016 victories in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — Black and Latinx Catholics are asserting their own political voice at a time of national protests for racial justice and police accountability, and a pandemic that impacts Black and brown communities disproportionately hard.

Alejandra Alarcon, 28, is a research communications coordinator at the Center for the Study of Los Angeles, located at Loyola Marymount University. Growing up in a working-class neighborhood in Los Angeles, Alarcon remembers the feast of La Virgen de Guadalupe as the most important date on the calendar. The daughter of immigrants from Nicaragua now straddles the cultures of academia and activism, a worldview shaped by a sometimes incongruous mix of spreadsheet data, protest movements in the streets and the centuries-old social justice teachings of her Catholic faith. The looming presidential election is a constant preoccupation.

"I'm scared about the possibility of Trump winning again because I've seen the direct impact he's had on my community," Alarcon said. "I have friends who I went to college with who have had their families separated. As a woman of color, it's also not lost of me how the pandemic has impacted my community more than others. I don't think Joe Biden is perfect. I'm not looking for perfect right now. I'm looking for better."

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As an advocate, Alarcon registers people to vote and fill out Census forms. Her participation in Black Lives Matter-led protests has elevated her conscience around issues of exclusion and equity. She admits frustration with how many young people, including her students, want to talk about the presidential election, but are usually much less engaged with local politics. "It's a tough sell with them," Alarcon

acknowledges. "Local and state races are as equally impactful as the national election."

Across the country in Washington, D.C., Jeanné Lewis, a Black Catholic running for city council, shares that belief in grassroots change.



Jeanné Lewis at the Commitment March on Washington 2020. (Provided photo)

"Faith was critical in my decision to run. It was a true discernment process," said Lewis, a member of St. Augustine Catholic Church, a historic Black church in the nation's capital. "I sought out religious counsel and prayed a lot about it, and

everything in my campaign is informed by the values of my faith."

Lewis, 40, worked as a faith-based community organizer in Ohio and Florida as her first job out of college, collaborating with churches, synagogues and mosques on immigrant justice, equity in education and affordable housing. Those experiences proved to be tangible, on-the-ground training that she draws from now in her campaign.

"Black and brown people have been pushed to the margins for decades and don't feel empowered," Lewis said. "My campaign is about creating a vision for our city that includes everyone, a place where everyone can thrive."

When it comes to faith leaders speaking out around issues of justice and the election, Lewis observes two different dynamics. "As a lay Catholic, my experience is not often with bishops or the national institution, it's more with my local church. Individual clergy, priests and sisters I see are very vocal in their community, and they do help people make sense of justice issues."

In her experience, this doesn't trickle down from the national level. "If the U.S. bishops' conference is attempting to take a lead, I don't hear it and see it," Lewis said. "As a person who pays attention to these issues, it's not reaching me, and that is problematic because the church has so many resources at its disposal."

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Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans, often feels left out of the political conversation as a Black Catholic, given that most polls and analysts largely focus on white religious voters.

"Those people who do the polls don't call and ask me," Bellow said with a laugh. "Black Catholics have a certain invisibility, and white voices have always been more valued. There is a reluctance to take the time because people assume what our struggles are, and assume what we're looking for instead of really listening."

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Bellow worries that Catholic leaders are not always helping the laity make sense of politics. "We have some very loud voices and bishops saying you can't vote this way, and it creates confusion for the Catholic faithful, especially young people," she said. "It's very disheartening to me."

Given the Catholic Church's own history in perpetuating white supremacy, Bellow observed, when mostly white members of the hierarchy tell voters they can't vote for certain candidates because of a single issue, the message is even more problematic.

"I'm the product of Black Catholic schools from kindergarten to college," she said. "The inconsistency really worries me because the church loses credibility when we don't admit to our participation in the slave trade or show lack of appreciation of Black culture in the church. Those are sins. The church is holy and human at the same time. I'm not expecting perfection, but we need to be more more open about our church's complicity in what is happening."

Nichole Flores, an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, senses a growing hunger to grapple with how institutions sustain injustice. The 38-year-old also notices some generational differences between herself and her students when it comes to politics.

The fact that Kamala Harris could become the first elected woman of color to serve in the White House energizes Flores, who is part of Catholics for Biden, a campaign outreach team of surrogates. Harris' historic candidacy is also a point of pride and intriguing to many of her students. But the professor, who teaches a religion and the election seminar for first-year students, finds younger people want a more radical political critique that is often different from what is served up by moderate Democrats.



Nichole Flores, assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, addresses a workshop on racism and white supremacy Jan. 20, 2018, at the Church of the Incarnation in Charlottesville, Virginia. (James C. Webster)

"Young people are raising questions and they recognize that representation is not liberation," Flores said. "They want the campaigns to acknowledge the brokenness of systems. They are upset about the extrajudicial killings by police and kids in cages, and they want a policy agenda that will really place those systems on trial. Students increasingly are looking at society through an intersectional lens. They see how issues relate to each other in ways even my generation doesn't."

Whether those young people will actually turn out to vote is an open question. Fewer than half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 voted in the 2016 presidential election. And compared to historic Black turnout for Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 races, Hillary Clinton drew significantly less support from Black voters and voters under 30 in the last election.

But there are recent signs that this could be changing. In the 2018 midterm election for Congress, millennial turnout among eligible voters nearly doubled from 22% in 2014 to 42% in 2018.

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Eighteen-year-old Andrea Fuentes, a sophomore at St. Norbert College in Wisconsin, will be voting. A political science major from Chicago, Fuentes is active in the Latinx Student Union and aspires to run for office in the future. She views the prospect of Trump being reelected as a grave danger, a position not always easy to share on a largely white campus in a state that Trump narrowly won in 2016, largely because of support from white Catholics.

"I'm very scared," Fuentes said. "The Trump administration does not understand immigrants, and many white people on campus don't understand immigrants."

At times, the mood at her university can be "tense" these days, she says. Students of color recoil when they see classmates posting pro-Trump messages on social media, and some encounters Fuentes has had reinforce polling that show significant differences between how Latinx and white Catholics view President Trump.

"Most of the people I know on campus definitely will vote for Trump," she said. "I was talking to a classmate and he told me, 'I'm not a person of color and I don't experience what you're going through.' He's voting for Trump. I try and get them to see my point, but you can't put that much effort into people who are closed-minded."

Craig Ford, an assistant professor of theology and religious studies at St. Norbert, says as the election nears, he is thinking a lot about how the stark realities of racial injustice, economic inequality and threats to public health are all interconnected. As a Black man, Ford says these challenges feel even more acute and intimate. Previously a professor at Fordham University in New York, the 32-year-old is adjusting to life in a state where Trump supporters are loud and proud.



Craig Ford, assistant professor of theology and religious studies at St. Norbert College (Courtesy of St. Norbert College)

"A few weeks ago there was a big Trump rally outside my door, there were Trump boats with Trump flags and people cheering them on," Ford said.

Catholics who support Trump, he believes, "are thinking about their economic interest and their race before their Catholicism." Except for a handful of bishops speaking out, Ford says the silence of most in the hierarchy "creates a vacuum that leaves white supremacy un-interrogated."

For Ish Ruiz, a 31-year-old teacher at Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory, a Catholic high school in San Francisco, the day after the 2016 election was traumatic.

"When I came to school students were crying in my classroom," Ruiz said. "They couldn't understand how this country could elect Trump. My job as a teacher was to accompany them while being unsure myself about how I felt about the country."

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>
> —Ish Ruiz

Four years later, Ruiz said, he is even more worried about how the Trump administration has promoted policies that harm immigrants, LGBTQ people and the environment.

"I can't help but feel frustrated, and a little confused, by Catholic leaders who say Trump is a 'pro-life' president," he said. "That seems very inconsistent with the fullness of Catholic teaching. When I see some Catholics making this a single-issue election, I wonder how in touch they are with young people who are Black, Hispanic, LGBTQ or marginalized in any way."

At a time when many of his students are angry and anxious, Ruiz draws guidance and hope from the Catholic tradition.

"My goal is to give students the tools to form their conscience," he said. "One of the questions I ask as a religion teacher is how can I awaken in my students an appreciation for the Catholic tradition. The way I've found to do it is to connect our faith with justice. All of my students might not be very devotional, but they know what is right and wrong, and they want to create a just world."

[John Gehring is Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, and author of *The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope's Challenge to the American Catholic Church*.]

This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.
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