

[Guest Voices](#)

Catholic lawyer Joseph Donnelly, pictured in a March 4, 2015, photo at the University of Notre

Catholic lawyer Joseph Donnelly, pictured in a March 4, 2015, photo at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, is President Joe Biden's nominee to serve as U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. Donnelly represented Indiana in the U.S. House of Representatives from 2003 to 2013 and the U.S. Senate from 2013 to 2019. The White House announced Biden's nomination of Donnelly Oct. 8. (CNS/Barbara Johnston, University of Notre Dame)



by Michael Sean Winters

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We all like a good schmear on our bagels, but a smear on our nominee to be ambassador to the Vatican? Not so much.

President Joe Biden [nominated](#) former Sen. Joe Donnelly Oct. 8 to be the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See. Biden's presence in the White House is especially unnerving to a certain kind of "professional Catholic" who fronts for the Republican Party, precisely because the president is a devout churchgoing Catholic who doesn't subscribe to their narrow interpretations of what it means to be devout. So it was only a matter of time before they began attacking the president's choice for ambassador to the Holy See, a job without a lot of power but with a great deal of

symbolic significance.

Unsurprisingly, Raymond Arroyo and his "papal posse" [criticized](#) the choice. Robert Royal said the choice had a "Trojan horse" quality to it and Fr. Gerald Murray said he is "not happy."

A more fulsome critique came from Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League, who issued a [statement](#) calling Donnelly a "rogue Catholic" and arguing that it was wrong to call him "pro-life." Donohue added, "Worse, Donnelly is not only at odds with the Catholic Church on abortion, he is pro-gay marriage, against religious liberty, and against school choice."

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It is true that Donnelly is not "pro-life" if you believe that the only people who get to decide what counts as "pro-life" are members of the National Right-to-Life Committee, which issues scorecards on all legislators. But the NRLC has long since abandoned any vestige of nonpartisanship. In fact, Donnelly was himself at the center of the NRLC's abandonment of its longtime nonpartisan approach.

In 2010, the Indiana Right-to-Life Political Action Committee (IRLC-PAC) [announced](#) it was abandoning its policy of endorsing all pro-life incumbents and refusing to endorse any Democrats for statewide or national elections. It argued that as long as pro-life Democrats in Indianapolis and Washington selected pro-choice legislative leaders like Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Indiana House Speaker Pat Bauer, they were advancing a pro-choice agenda.

In short, no room for moderates.

According to the IRLC-PAC statement, "Congressman Brad Ellsworth, Congressman Baron Hill, and Congressman Joe Donnelly betrayed the trust of pro-life Hoosiers by voting for the pro-abortion federal health care reform bill."

The "pro-abortion federal health care reform bill" they had in mind was the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which, it could be argued, was the outstanding pro-life legislation of our time, extending health insurance coverage to millions of Americans, greatly strengthening Catholic hospital networks and expanding access to prenatal care. And, longtime pro-life leaders like Bart Stupak negotiated a

[compromise](#) that essentially got the Hyde Amendment back into the ACA, when the bill could not be amended because the Democrats had lost their filibuster-proof majority in the Senate.

None of that history bothers Donohue. "Donnelly also voted for the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, in 2010, even though the bill required Catholic non-profits, such as the Little Sisters of the Poor, to pay for abortion-inducing drugs in their healthcare plans," he frets. As Donohue well knows, the Catholic Health Association also supported the ACA and they know more about health care than the U.S. bishops' conference, which foolishly opposed the bill.

Donohue is also flat wrong to assert that the ACA required the Little Sisters or anyone else to cover contraception, but it did require the secretary of Health and Human Services to determine what counted as minimum care in all insurance policies. The ACA passed in 2010. The contraception mandate came out in late 2011, and the conscience exemption issue was not resolved until early 2012. Few were more opposed to the initial narrow exemptions than [myself](#). But eventually a good faith compromise was worked out — not good enough for the religious liberty zealots who had taken over the bishops' conference, but good enough for me.

Those zealots celebrated in 2017 when the Trump administration gave them everything they asked for, but their refusal to seek compromise on that issue will come back to haunt them, as I [predicted](#) at the time.

I hope the ambassador-designate knows that being attacked by a blowhard like Bill Donohue is a mark of distinction and honor, and I welcome him to the club.

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A similar narrowness of vision afflicts the rest of Donohue's indictment. "On gay marriage, Donnelly went through a similar 'evolution,' " Donohue thunders. "He was initially opposed to it, which is why the Human Rights Campaign, a prominent gay organization, gave him a score of only 30% when he was in the House. But when he got to the Senate, this homosexual entity was so delighted with him that they gave him a score of 85%."

Maybe Donohue did not notice it, but the whole country went through quite an evolution on the issue of gay rights over the past 50 years.

As for Donnelly's position on school choice, I can think of no moral teaching of the Catholic church that is implicated in any position on the issue.

I hope the ambassador-designate knows that being attacked by a blowhard like Bill Donohue is a mark of distinction and honor, and I welcome him to the club of those who have felt Donohue's ire. He first went after me [in 2009](#) and as recently as [2017](#). Those of us who have been attacked have a special handshake I shall teach the former senator if and when I meet him!

That special handshake should not, repeat not, be confused with the handshake Pope Francis and Pelosi recently shared, causing conservative Catholic commentator Taylor Marshall to ask if it was "[freemasonic](#)." It takes a lot to make Donohue and Arroyo look sensible, but Taylor Marshall manages to do it with every episode of his show.

There is a place, an important and necessary place, for intelligent conservative Catholic commentary. Sadly, it is increasingly difficult to find such a place. Instead, all the most important moral discussions our society is called upon to entertain are stuck in a sterile, repetitive, PR-driven debate that yields not light, only heat. That heat is melting the moral fabric of our society and Donohue and his ilk are too blind to see it.