Opinion

News



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The first anniversary of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol prompted somber remembrance and reflection on the previously unthinkable: the use of violence to try to overturn a free and fair election in the United States of America. As we say in our editorial that looks back on that day, it could only be called an attempted insurrection or coup.

In addition to that editorial, NCR also ran a story about the Vatican's newspaper characterizing the day as an attack on democracy, and a column by Michael Sean Winters chastising the U.S. bishops for not doing enough to defend democracy in the wake of the attack.

But our main story on the day of the anniversary was not explicitly about the events of Jan. 6, 2021, although unfortunately there is a connection. It was a report from staff reporter Brian Fraga about how right-wing Catholic organizations have received millions of dollars from a "dark money" fund called Donors Trust.

Among the groups receiving money were Catholic parishes and one diocese, pro-life organizations, religious liberty law firms, a free-market think tank, and academic centers at Catholic colleges that advocate libertarianism and constitutional originalism, Fraga reports.

This type of investigative report is just the latest in what has become regular fare on our pages: the attempt to bring some light to the connections among conservative Catholic individuals and organizations, and the sources of their often-extravagant funding.

In shorthand: Follow the money.

Although NCR has a 58-year history of independent, investigative journalism, these "follow the money" stories began with a trio of reports by former editor Tom Roberts in 2017: first, about the wealth and influence of the Knights of Columbus; second, about the impact of wealthy donors, including the Busch family and Charles Koch foundations, at the Catholic University of America; and finally about three individuals, Tim Busch, Sean Fieler and Frank Hanna, and their financial influence on the church and Catholic nonprofit organizations.

In addition to his reporting, Roberts has written a number of opinion pieces sounding the alarm about the damage these financial partnerships are doing to the church.

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Other NCR writers have picked up the mantle with these "follow the money" stories. As national correspondent in 2019, I wrote a four-part series connecting the dots between the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) media conglomerate, conservative Catholic money and Trumpian politics. My successor, Christopher White, last spring revealed how conservative Catholic philanthropists and pro-life leaders are key players behind efforts to limit voter access in a number of states.

What has shifted in the more recent reporting — and is evident in Fraga's Jan. 6 piece — is that the concerns are no longer just about what these individuals and groups are doing to the church or to Catholics, but how they are now networked with folks who are literally treasonous.

As Fraga reports, Donors Trust, in addition to funding these right-wing Catholics organizations, also has provided hefty sums of money to nonprofits that spread misinformation about the 2020 presidential election and organized the Jan. 6 attack at the U.S. Capitol building.

These are no mere political, theological or ideological differences, as Michael Sean Winters points out in a follow-up column about the Donors Trust connections. (He also does some digging on one of the recipients of Donors Trust's largesse, the Catholic Association Foundation. It's must-reading.)

Winters responds to Catholic University philosophy professor Melissa Moschella, who argues that sometimes doing good requires cooperating with people and organizations that do some things you disagree with.

"Treason," Winters writes, "is not something you simply 'disagree with.' "

I can think of nothing more frightening or critical than the continuing assaults on our democratic institutions. People with a firsthand understanding of what's at stake — Jimmy Carter, Madeleine Albright and Michael Gerson, to name a few — are seriously concerned about authoritarianism and fascism in the United States.

It would seem obvious that our Catholic faith and social teaching compel us to stop the undermining of democracy, indeed of truth itself. Instead, too many of our fellow Catholics are befriending and/or in bed financially with those who are fanning the flames of authoritarianism.

Whatever these Catholics' original motivations were, now is the time to recognize how dangerous such alliances are. Until then, we at NCR will continue to follow the money.

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