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Florida Gov. Ron Desantis and Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami are seen in this compo

Florida Gov. Ron Desantis and Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami are seen in this composite photo. (CNS composite; photos by Tom Brenner, Reuters; Stefano Dal Pozzolo)



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February 14, 2022

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WASHINGTON — The archbishop of Miami said Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida had hit a "new low" after the politician said it was "disgusting" to compare Cubans who fled the island-nation as unaccompanied minors in the 1960s with present waves of migrant children from Central America.

"Children are children — and no child should be deemed 'disgusting' — especially by a public servant," said Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski in Feb. 10 news conference.

The incumbent Republican governor is running for a second term and has been taking swipes at groups of migrants and present-day immigration.

But he was able to seek the backing of some Cuban immigrants in Florida, part of a group of over 14,000 minors brought to the U.S. through Operation Pedro Pan, a program organized by the Catholic Church with the help of the U.S. government in the 1960s.

One of them was Maximo Alvarez, a beneficiary of Operation Pedro Pan.

"Let me assure you that they knew exactly who I was, they knew who my parents were. They are using this program to convince people that this is similar to what is happening today. Not even close," he said during the Feb. 7 event with DeSantis.

"What is happening right now, you see children as merchandise and these cartels are using these kids as merchandise for personal gain," Alvarez said. "When I came, we came directly into the hands of the church, and we were treated like family."

The Miami archbishop said that the lack of solidarity by immigrants who were former unaccompanied minors from Cuba and went through similar circumstances as migrant children today was "disappointing."

"Even while recognizing the good care afforded them by Catholic Charities 60 years ago, they begrudge that same care being extended to migrant children today. Msgr. Bryan O. Walsh, the revered 'father' of the Operation Pedro Pan children, is rolling over in his grave," he said.

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Archbishop Wenski, who tends to a large flock that includes many immigrants in his flock of more than 1 million in South Florida, was accompanied by Mike Fernandez, one of a two Pedro Pan beneficiaries who supported migrant children and their families.

Fernandez, a Republican donor to the state's GOP, said the governor's words and actions were shameful. He also attacked policies by DeSantis targeting agencies that assist migrant children, noting that the children arriving today "are not inferior in any way."

Archbishop Wenski said the DeSantis event amounted to "political theater attacking (Joe) Biden's admittedly chaotic immigration policies."

"It showed that the governor has a powerful machine in South Florida capable of mobilizing (and manipulating) a segment of our community to advance his political agenda — but his bullying of kids also showed weakness," the archbishop said.

He added that "the success of the Pedro Pan kids made possible by the freedom and opportunity of this great land makes clear that magnanimity rather than mean-spiritedness is a best practice in resolving our immigration challenges."

The event, peppered with posters that read "children yes, politics no," also featured brief comments by a boy in his teens who had been helped by Catholic Charities' Children's Village in Florida, part of a network of shelters that help "unaccompanied, undocumented, immigrant children 0-17 years of age," according to its website.

The Catholic nonprofit came under attack by the governor, who passed an executive order last year cutting off state funding to groups that help unaccompanied migrant minors who entered the country without permission.

At his event, DeSantis said that "to equate what's going on with the southern border with mass trafficking of humans, illegal entry, drugs, all this other stuff with Operation Pedro Pan, quite frankly, is disgusting."

Fernandez said the governor's words and actions were shameful.

"Let me tell you what I think is disgusting — a proposed heartless policy toward immigrant children," he said. "The actions being proposed, the law being implemented is cruel, and those promoting it should be embarrassed by this crusade which they have totally embraced."