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Former U.S. Attorney Gen. William Barr addresses the audience July 30 at the Napa Institute's annual summer conference. (NCR screenshot)



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This year's Napa Institute conference, held at the ritzy Meritage Resort and Spa in Napa, California, was something of a cultural Minotaur, half human, half beast, according to my colleague Brian Fraga, who caught the short straw and watched the proceedings remotely. The usual peddling of cultural fear that is the distinguishing characteristic of the American right is now mixed with triumphalism that the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned *Roe* v*. Wade*.

"We live in a time in which catastrophically bad ideas are floating all around," warned Msgr. James Shea, president of the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota.

"Transgenderism is the latest manifestation of a long struggle to liberate ourselves from nature itself, from the limits of human biology through technology and through social change," complained Ethics and Public Policy Fellow Aaron Kheriarty.

The cultural sky is always falling when conservative Catholics gather for a group fret, at least when it comes to matters of pelvic theology. And other cultural concerns — with moral significance and ripe for Christian examination — never seem to make the cut: Whatever else you can say about a Napa Institute event, the rich are not sent away empty!

> The Napa Institute is the highest expression of a kind of Catholic Lite unique to conservative American plutocrats.
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This year's doom-and-gloom preaching was offset by the excitement generated by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs* v*. Jackson Women's Health Organization.* "The morale of Catholics has never been higher, and the reason: because *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned," said an exultant Tim Busch, who owns the

Meritage Resort, co-founded the Napa Institute and has promised to bring his brand of libertarian economics to the Vatican. Busch urged the group to take the pro-life fight to all 50 states but, unsurprisingly, Busch sees only a political fight. He is thoroughly unalert to the costs to the culture and to the communion of faith his cultural warrior approach imposes.

Former Attorney General William Barr spoke to the group, counseling them to a deliberate approach on the abortion issue as it shifts to legislatures. But Barr repeated some of the historical nonsense he apparently believes about the American founding.

“In my Notre Dame speech, I basically pointed out that our great Anglo-American, liberal, democratic system, which took centuries of painstaking development from so many sources in the Western tradition, from classical, Christian thought, moderate Enlightenment, British system and so forth, in my mind reached its highest expression in the American Constitution. And, it is premised on the foundation of Christianity. It presupposes a robust people that is animated by Christian moral values," Barr said at the Napa event.

That is nonsense on stilts, as I pointed out after his 2019 speech at the University of Notre Dame.

On the other hand, I was pleasantly surprised to hear Barr describe former White House Chief-of-Staff Mick Mulvaney's job as being akin to that of a lion trainer in the cage with the lion. He specifically commended Mulvaney for his post-Jan. 6 stance. (Mulvaney has distanced himself from Donald Trump.)

Barr also complained about Trump calling him a RINO, a Republican In Name Only. The attempt to distance oneself from the former president does not excuse the years of complicity, but it is still preferable to the Raymond Arroyo and Laura Ingraham stance of slavishly following the scripts that come from Mar-a-Lago.

The annual event always includes wine tastings and cigar receptions. At $2,700 a head, I am hoping the wines and cigars were pretty good. Other conservative Catholics groups, like Legatus, Franciscan University of Steubenville and the Busch School of Business at Catholic University, sponsor a lunch or a rosary at the conference. In a nod to clericalism, priests and religious get a 50% discount and bishops attend the event for free.

One reception this year caught my eye. One night, after the "Flavors of Eastern Europe —Stations and Grazing Dinner Event," there was a "Private Reception sponsored by National Eucharistic Revival." That’s curious. The National Eucharistic Revival is being sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), that is to say, by men who have made a promise of obedience to the pope. The Napa Institute conference is notorious for the centrality it places on celebrations of the pre-Vatican II Mass and it is well known by all the bishops that the Holy Father is currently engaged in an effort to redirect some of the lousy ecclesiology produced by devotion to the old rite. Why would the bishops’ conference have a private reception at such an event at such a moment?

They didn't. Chieko Noguchi, director of public affairs at the USCCB, told NCR in an email that the reception "was not an official USCCB event" and that "no USCCB funds were expended." Was Bishop Andrew Cozzens, chair of the USCCB Evangelization Committee and point person for the Eucharistic Revival, freelancing?

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Conservative Christians have every right to come together for fellowship. They have as much right to pursue pro-life political strategies as liberal Catholics have a right to pursue pro-immigration and pro-environmental policies.

The problem with the Napa Institute approach is twofold. First, it trims those parts of the Catholic moral imagination that do not fit into their political views. There is no consistent ethic of life here. Second, it reduces the struggle of faith, the interplay of grace and sin, to a political equation that is controlled by humans. There is no room for the divine, still less for a divinity who is irenic, poor and willing to accept unjust suffering.

These faults can be found on the Christian Left as well, but at least the left doesn't prattle on about their political reductions while sipping expensive wine at a multimillion-dollar resort, rushing to cigar receptions and Tridentine Masses. The U.S. Constitution may not be the "highest expression" of Western thought, but the Napa Institute is the highest expression of a kind of Catholic Lite unique to conservative American plutocrats.

The most interesting dynamic on display at this year's Napa conference was that their whole narrative rests on the assumption of cultural decline. The world is always going to hell in a handbasket, unless we repent and adopt their fixes for the culture.

The Napa Institute entails as much whine as wine. Now they have won their long-sought goal, and they have not figured out how to adjust their storyline. They are like a cat that falls and doesn't land on all fours, a very rich cat but a very wobbly one. They must wrestle with the question: How do you maintain a culture of grievance when you hold a six-to-three majority on the Supreme Court?