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Crowds of people with Trump banners and American flags cover the outside of the Capitol bui

Supporters of then-President Donald Trump breach the U.S. Capitol in Washington Jan. 6, 2021. (OSV News photo/Leah Millis, Reuters)

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Catholics have a responsibility to address rising threats to democratic norms in civic and social life, panelists said at a Feb. 16 event hosted by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life.

Noting Pope Francis has cautioned societies against a "retreat from democracy" as well as the "siren songs of authoritarianism," panelists argued Catholics should be champions of democracy, a political system that ultimately helped them integrate into an American society that had viewed them with suspicion.

Pointing to a rise in political violence, most notably the Jan. 6, 2021 riot at the U.S. Capitol building -- the day 2,000 supporters of then-President Donald Trump attempted to block Congress' certification of President Joe Biden's 2020 election victory -- as well as certain "intolerance" to differing viewpoints in some factions of the left, panelists said Catholics have a responsibility to practice civil discourse in a

highly polarized climate.

"We as Americans are very fixated on rights," said Vincent Rougeau, both the first lay and first Black president of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, as well as the author of "Christians in the American Empire: Faith and Citizenship in the New World Order."

"But we as Catholics know that rights must be balanced with responsibilities, and we have a responsibility to heal divisions in our country," he added.

Nichole Flores, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia who studies the relationship between Catholicism and democracy and is the author of "The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy," said she is growing "increasingly concerned that the Catholic Church and we as Catholics have not been able to speak with a clear enough moral voice on behalf of democracy as an institution on behalf of democratic norms."

Flores said that while there are "instances where that forceful, authoritative moral voice has broken through," she doesn't think there is "one particular side or part of the church who's the bad guy here."

"But there have been opportunities for all of us to be more clear in making the case for the Catholic case for democracy, and to begin by defending norms that are not only native to American democracy, but that are resonant with our own Catholic tradition," she said.

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Jennifer Frey, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of South Carolina and a faculty fellow at The Institute of Human Ecology at The Catholic University of America in Washington, said that there are factions of the right drawn to a "kind of strong man" authoritarian figure like Trump, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, or former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro.

"(This) deviates quite a bit from our tradition, which always stresses the importance of character and leadership," she said.

"There's nothing conservative about saying that character doesn't matter, and that all we need is a kind of authoritarian figure who will bring about Christian culture," Frey said. "There's nothing conservative about that view; that's not consonant with our tradition."

Frey said those who hold public office "are in fact, teaching our young people what is acceptable, what isn't acceptable," calling that an "enormous responsibility."

"I'm old enough to remember when it was the conservatives in the late 90s who were the ones constantly pointing out that we have to have people in office with great character," Frey said. "Well, that was true in the late 90s, but it's also true now."

Rougeau concurred, saying, "We need to demand more of ourselves in any leadership role we play," calling examples of leadership "lacking" in the current political climate.

"I see this all the time with my students," he said. "How can we expect our students to behave civilly to one another, when everything they see -- everything they see -- are the people they're supposed to respect, the people who are leading their country, behaving in the most atrocious and outrageous ways?"

Rougeau challenged Catholics to reflect on how young people are internalizing this. "We call to them and say, 'Why are you behaving improperly?' Based on what kinds of models? Based on what kinds of examples?"