Opinion
NCR Voices



Speakers for the July 17-21, 2024, National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis include, clockwise from top left: Fr. Michael Schmitz, Fr. Josh Johnson, Bishop Robert Barron, Chris Stefanick, Fr. Agustino Torres and Montse Alvarado. (NCR/CNS, OSV News)



by Michael Sean Winters

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The U.S. bishops' conference has released the names of headlining speakers for next year's Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis. Wouldn't it have been nice if they had found at least some speakers who were not from the Steubenville wing of the church?

OK, OK. That's an exaggeration. America magazine's Gloria Purvis, one of the U.S. church's outstanding pro-life and anti-racism voices, is on the list. And the nuncio, Archbishop, soon-to-be-Cardinal, Christophe Pierre, is a churchman not an ideologue, and he has never thrown his boss under the bus. But at least some of the speakers talk about Pope Francis like he is a leper or they traffic in the kind of culture war ideology that this pope is so keen to keep at a distance.

Fr. Mike Schmitz is a popular podcaster and frequent speaker at more traditional Catholic events like men's conferences and conservative audiences. He is affiliated with FOCUS, the conservative Catholic version of Campus Crusade for Christ. He has spoken at the Franciscan University of Steubenville's youth assemblies, and almost everything he says has the ring of what we could call the Steubenville approach to religion: heavy on tautology and apologetics, not very intellectually or spiritually sophisticated, incapable of nuance and comfortable with pat answers that only ring true within the circle of the already redeemed. It aims at a muscular Catholicism, I suppose, but it is astonishingly akin to the tone and temper of fundamentalism.

In one recent podcast, Schmitz discusses the origins of the papacy. Now, as Catholics, we believe that our Lord Jesus chose the Twelve, and confirmed Peter as their leader, but to assert that the papacy "was invented by God Himself" is a little facile. The priest is a little high strung in this, and other videos, and perhaps his staccato delivery is effective with some people. I found myself wanting to scream, "No more espresso for you!"

Father Schmitz needs to chill.

Pope Francis blesses a 4-foot-tall monstrance, a chalice and a paten during an audience with

Pope Francis blesses a 4-foot-tall monstrance, a chalice and a paten during an audience with members of the organizing committees of the U.S. National Eucharistic Congress and Eucharistic Revival in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican June 19. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Another speaker, Fr. Josh Johnson, who hosts a popular Ascension podcast, is a priest of the Baton Rouge Diocese. On one podcast episode, someone complained that Pope Francis had spoken about Hell being empty in a way that the listener found offensive and possibly heretical.

Fr. Josh's response was more than a little tepid. He started by pointing out that disciples grumble amongst each other, and always have, but we are called to pray for each other. "Pray for the pope, he is an imperfect human being," doesn't sound like a resounding endorsement. He went on to point out that "Pope Francis is not infallible," and that the pope's off-the-cuff remarks are certainly not magisterial.

True enough, but in my experience, the pope's comments that generate the most controversy are also those, like the one referenced on the podcast, in which the pope is most emphatically stating the central kerygma of the Gospel, mercy, which drives the neo-Pelagians nuts. The last time I checked, the Gospels do not lack for authority.

Finally, Fr. Josh noted that people get misquoted all the time, which is true, but isn't really a ringing endorsement of this pope. He offered the pope would be surrounded by a community of believers who would correct him if he did say something that was wrong.

This response earned a meh.

No one was surprised to see Bishop Robert Barron on the list. The bishop of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, is known for his Word on Fire ministry, which is the platform he uses to engage issues beyond the borders of his diocese. It was on the Word on Fire website that he recently took aim at Cardinal-designate Américo Aguiar of Lisbon, Portugal, over remarks Aguiar made regarding the need to avoid proselytism and both recognize and embrace diversity.

Barron puts his own particular spin on what Aguiar said: "I will admit that the remark of his that disturbed me the most, however, was this one: 'That we all understand

that differences are a richness and the world will be objectively better if we are capable of placing in the hearts of all young people this certainty,' implying that fundamental disagreement on matters of religion is good in itself, indeed what God actively desires."

Did Aguiar imply that? Might not he be implying that God leads people to himself in his own way and on his own timetable? Or that the long history of conflicts over religion are a scandal to God and that we must find ways to affirm our beliefs while respecting differences?

Barron continues: "Behind so much of the language of tolerance, acceptance and non-judgmentalism in regard to religion is the profound conviction that religious truth is unavailable to us and that it finally doesn't matter what one believes as long as one subscribes to certain ethical principles."

Are those the sentiments behind Bishop Aguiar's remarks? Or, more likely, is Barron forcing a Portuguese prelate into an American culture war frame because poor Bishop Barron has no other frame through which to view the world? He says he wants to evangelize, but he only preaches to the choir, an increasingly small, ideologically driven choir.

When I first encountered then-Fr. Robert Barron's ministry, it was apparent he was angling to inherit the mantle of Cardinal Francis George, who was a genuine scholar and sometimes culture warrior. Now it seems Barron is more keen on inheriting the mantle of Archbishop Charles Chaput, a genuine and persistent culture warrior who routinely puts others' comments in the worst possible light in order to make a point.

This shift from one prelate to another represents a decline.

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This list of right-leaning culture warriors speaking at the Congress includes EWTN's Montse Alvarado, who previously worked as executive director at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty; EWTN's Franciscan Friar of Renewal Fr. Agustino Torres; and Chris Stefanick, a Steubenville alumnus.

The list is ironic because the impetus for the Congress was the belief, based on one badly worded question in one poll, that many Catholics no longer believed in the real

presence of Christ in the Eucharist. But there are no theologians or liturgists scheduled so far, only podcasters. The one Scripture scholar on the list, Mary Healy, teaches at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, an institution that is known for its abundance of Pope Francis haters.

Instead of engaging the breadth of the American Catholic experience, the speakers' list looks like the U.S. bishops' conference outsourced the programming to Steubenville. Apart from Purvis and Pierre, there is no speaker I would cross the street, let alone the country, to hear.

It is probably too late to pull the plug on this event. I will close by noting I warned the bishops 17 months ago not to let this congress turn into "a very expensive, very nostalgic boondoggle." It appears they did not listen.