Opinion
NCR Voices



U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland is seen at the Department of Justice June 13, 2022, in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)



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Attorney General Merrick Garland is a man of integrity and decency, which may be why he seemed so uncomfortable testifying before the House Judiciary Committee. The Republicans on the committee, including Chairman Rep. Jim Jordan, are often indecent and they parted with their integrity when they joined the cult of Donald Trump.

But this is 2023 and it is hard to believe that Garland was not better prepared to answer the charges he had to know would come his way. In an exchange with Rep. Jefferson Van Drew, Garland declined to simply say that traditional Catholics were not "violent extremists."

The allegation is based on a memo from an FBI field office that was leaked to the media earlier this year. It contained assertions about a growing interest in "radical-traditionalist Catholic ideology" among some white supremacists and other hate groups such as the Proud Boys, as well as some analysis from the left-leaning Southern Poverty Law Center that even labeled radical traditionalist Catholic groups as hate groups. We need the scare quotes because people who like Mass in Latin with a priest facing the wall are not really "traditional Catholics." Traditional Catholics follow the pope and the pope has indicated he wants us to embrace the rite promulgated after Vatican II. But that is neither here nor there.

Garland rightly said that it was "outrageous" and "absurd" to accuse him of holding such a view. The indignation in his voice was real and it was appropriate. He correctly noted that he and FBI Director Christopher Wray were appalled by the leaked memo and had said so at the time.

None of that mattered. The clip that made the rounds on conservative media showed only what appeared to be equivocation in the face of a direct question. The attorney general needs better media prep.

The allegation that this FBI memo shows that the Biden administration is anti-Catholic is a staple on Fox News. Of course, Raymond Arroyo weighed in on the controversy on his weekly TV show more than once, here and here. EWTN's "News Nightly" has run segments on the kerfuffle several times too, such as here and here.

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The EWTN-owned National Catholic Register, as well as Republicans on Capitol Hill, tried to breathe new life into the story in August claiming that the anti-Catholic approach was more widespread, that it was not the work product of one field office in Richmond. But the original memo mentioned the field office in Portland, Oregon, too.

As Kathleen McChesney, who worked at the FBI for many years, told America magazine, the leaked memo was "a terrible analytical document." The Southern Poverty Law Center is certainly capable of the kind of anti-Catholic bigotry one finds in certain sectors of elite opinion. Anti-Catholicism used to be common on the right and now it is more often found on the left, especially since the *Dobbs*' decision overturning *Roe* v. *Wade*.

Still, even if one is not surprised by the persistence of anti-Catholic bigotry in American culture, it is alarming when someone working for the government identifies a group of believers as warranting special attention. It violates the spirit of the Second Amendment and the text of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

That said, these fears of "persecution" are overwrought. What is going on in Nicaragua is persecution. What happened to the church during the Kulturkampf in Germany was persecution. This memo was a mistake, not a crusade.

There is a reason conservative Catholic media and politicians are trying to make hay about this. Catholics are a critical bloc of the electorate, and Catholics are overrepresented in swing states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Arizona. The idea that Merrick Garland is a bigot is preposterous. It is also preposterous that he wasn't better armed with one-word or at least one-sentence answers to the expected line of questions from Republicans on the Judiciary Committee.