Opinion
Guest Voices



Former Tyler, Texas, Bishop Joseph Strickland speaks at a rally in Los Angeles June 16 to protest the LA Dodgers honoring the "Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence" drag group during the team's LGBTQ Pride Night at Dodger Stadium. Catholics for Catholics was one of the lead organizers in the rally. (OSV News/Reuters/Kirby Lee-USA TODAY Sports)



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Catholics for Catholics.

Sounds like, well, a good thing. Catholics for Catholics. Sure. Why not?

In some previous era, it just might have been as benign as it sounds.

But there is nothing benign or uplifting about it. Nothing terribly Catholic about it either.

As detailed in an exhaustive report by NCR's Brian Fraga, the relatively new group is the latest, and most extreme, expression of Catholic-branded politics.

> Provocative pop-ups like Catholics for Catholics are ecclesiastical equivalents of a financial scam. … Don't give away the password to your spiritual account.
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The group was founded and is led by John Yep, an election denier who travels in the company of conspiracy theorists and others who are serious threats to American democracy. His religious formation included 14 years, he says, discerning priesthood in the corruption-plagued Legionaries of Christ.

Well-funded and with boundless arrogance, Yep has proclaimed himself and his cohorts Catholic leaders and has announced that he is out to reclaim the term "Catholic."

To that end, he is hosting a "Catholic Prayer for Trump" event at the former president's Mar-a-Lago resort, scene of some of the many alleged federal crimes for which he's been indicted. The 1,000-buck-a-pop black-tie affair includes, among speakers, such luminaries as Roger Stone, he of dirty trickster fame who was

convicted of lying to Congress only to have his 40-month sentence commuted by the then president. Another speaker listed is retired Gen. Michael Flynn, who pled guilty to lying to the FBI and was pardoned by the past president.

Also on the list is Jack Posobiec, a far-right conspiracy theorist and bombast artist, who made waves by promising (satirically, he later said) the overthrow of democracy.

Yep has written that Trump won the 2020 election and that his event will proclaim that Trump is "the only Catholic option for 2024."

Resist the eye roll for just a moment. It's an understandable reflex, but too dismissive considering the reality.



A confrontation takes place outside Dodger Stadium on June 16. Protesters gathered near the venue as the Los Angeles Dodgers prepared to honor the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence a LGBTQ drag group that uses Catholic symbols in what some say is a mocking fashion. (OSV News/Reuters/Kirby Lee-USA TODAY)

In an earlier era, I relied heavily on both the writing and the personal guidance of the esteemed Catholic historian Msgr. John Tracy Ellis. He was beyond gracious in answering the phone calls of a young reporter trying to understand the changing landscape of the American church in the post-Vatican II era. It was long ago.

As forward thinking as he might have been, no one of that era could have predicted today's distortions of Catholic teaching and polity, not to mention the rogue extra-ecclesial structures erected in the current era, in which Catholicism, usurped as a brand, becomes servant to political and economic ends.

A long-ago scribbled note in the margin of the preface of his *American Catholicism* states, "integration of political and ecclesiastical history." I was highlighting a passage in which Ellis reflects on another writer's lament "that for too long a time there has existed a tendency to treat secular history and ecclesiastical history as two self-contained subjects. No serious historian should be satisfied with a division of that kind."

I couldn't help thinking that Ellis today might consider the historian's task to be not so much assessing the complementary relationship between civic and religious life and how each affected the other, but rather the more agonizing burden of untangling the extant religious/political symbiosis in which each compromises the other and each drains the other of meaning.

Provocative pop-ups like Catholics for Catholics are ecclesiastical equivalents of a financial scam. Someone who sounds sincere, says the right words, perhaps exhibits heart-rending piety, and wants to use your faith to personal and political ends. Don't give away the password to your spiritual account.



U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke holds the monstrance during Mass July 25, 2019, at the Napa Institute's annual Summer Conference in California. (CNS/Courtesy of Napa Institute)

Yep's group may be the latest, and perhaps most bizarre, expression of Catholic-branded politics, but the phenomenon has been long in the making. In the past, Catholic-branded politics may have been a distant wish of those who longed for a Catholicism undisturbed by such a demanding Catholic social justice tradition. All those teachings that got in the way of unfettered capitalism and taking advantage of others in the name of progress. All that talk about the poor and justice and nonviolence and excessive military spending and exploitation of other cultures and their resources.

Couldn't we just keep things simple, stake our religious bona fides on opposing abortion and anyone who isn't heterosexual? Weren't they the issues that really were dangerous to society and to families? The rest? That's all just a matter of prudential judgment.

It's no longer a faraway foggy dream. Groups such as the Napa Institute, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Legatus, The Acton Institute — with big money backers like Timothy Busch, Sean Feiler, Frank Hanna, and the chief manipulator behind the black money curtain, Leonard Leo — have made Catholic-brand politics a reality. In a way few could have imagined a generation ago, they've stepped into, with huge amounts of money, the space in the public square that once was the domain of Catholic leadership.

They are the ones, with news outfits they fund and right-wing conferences at high-end venues, hosting the most extreme voices in church and state, who are fashioning the Catholic narrative for the wider culture. They are, as we've said in the past, the new magisterium for the U.S. church.

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Msgr. Ellis could hardly have imagined the state of today's church. He could not have imagined a bishops' conference so confined to a partisan political corner. He could not have imagined an episcopacy so lacking in moral authority, victims of the horrible, self-inflicted wound of the ongoing abuse scandal.

Catholics of today need to realize that none of the old categories or words function as they once did. Mirroring the civic reality of the moment, extremists have taken over much of the public square in the name of Catholicism. They preach a crimped and narrow church, one that is retributive and rule-bound, willing to contort teachings and tradition in the interest of money and political power.

Yep's group is a sampling of what we're going to see in the coming months of this election year. Catholicism is for sale. And there are people willing to ante up bundles for the brand.

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