News



Participating in the May 14 webinar titled titled "Civilize It: Unifying a Divided Church" were (clockwise from top left): moderator Gloria Purvis of America Media; Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego; Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota; and Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas. (NCR screenshot)



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May 15, 2024

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No matter who wins the U.S presidential election in November, Catholics have an obligation to pray not only for the good of the country but also that the winner succeeds in his leadership, said San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy.

"We don't want to pray that they will fail," said McElroy. "We want to really pray and believe and hope that they will succeed."

The cardinal made his remarks as part of a May 14 webinar titled "Civilize It: Unifying a Divided Church," sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development. The event was part of a broader "Civilize It" campaign for "a better kind of politics," which includes a pledge to engage in charity, clarity and creativity.

The webinar, moderated by Gloria Purvis of America Media, also featured Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, and Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, the founder of the media ministry Word on Fire.

Flores stressed the importance of Catholics being engaged in the political process, whatever the outcome of the election. "Even if the other party wins, you have to be engaged," he said, noting that Catholics have to "admit that no party is going to completely hold to the convictions we hold as Catholics."

"Sometimes it even happens that the party we wanted to win wins, and we kind of let it go because they're in charge now, so yeah, we won," he said. "We need to even resist the party we are in favor of when they are promoting something we can't in good conscience support. Sometimes we give them a free pass."

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Barron also reminded Catholics that they are not beholden to either political party. "We declare the Lord Jesus Christ risen from the dead, and that's where our hope comes from," he said. "We have to have a detachment from this hyperstress on the political."

A recent poll by the Pew Research Center found that a majority of Catholics, 55%, would vote for Donald Trump if the election were held today. The number was 61% for white Catholics. Hispanic Catholics favored President Joe Biden over Trump by a small margin, 49% to 47%, respectively.

All three bishops speaking during the webinar stressed the importance of dialogue during a time when the country and the church are extremely polarized.

McElroy noted that partisan labels have become shorthand for one's worldview, and that such oppositional identities have exacerbated stresses in the church.

"Catholics have always disagreed on the substantive issues. This is not an entirely new phenomenon," he said, adding that the depth of polarization in the church today is "very alarming."

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>
> —Bishop Daniel Flores
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Flores also noticed a difference in how Catholics talk about political matters now, with a tendency to talk past each other and to make caricatures of those with whom we disagree.

"In our current situation, politics is almost a religion and sometimes it's a sport. But actually it's not supposed to be either. It's supposed to be a civil conversation ... to seek what is good and to make the priorities of how to achieve it," he said.

Barron decried the "tribalism" of sorting into opposing camps, which forgets that love makes real dialogue possible. "Now it becomes simply winning an argument, or waving the flag of my tribe, as opposed to all of us together endeavoring to learn the truth."

As the founder of Word on Fire, Barron has a significant presence online, but called the atmosphere there "toxic" and encouraged Catholics to "detox from social media."

"I've tried always to avoid polemics in my work — I've been doing this for about 20-some years — not to get involved in tribalistic argumentation, but to emphasize the truth and beauty of the tradition," Barron said.

The Minnesota bishop also suggested that friendships among those who disagree can alleviate ideological polarization. He has suggested to groups of priests, where younger, more conservative clergy are at odds with older, more liberal ones, that they should play golf together and accept dinner invitations from one another. "The more you talk, the more you'll see a commonality."

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According to McElroy, women religious, "who have a tradition of dialogue," could be a resource for priests and parishes in honing that skill.

Flores, who has been leading the synod process in the United States, said Pope Francis began the process, in part, because of his observation of rampant polarization, especially online, and the need for the church to "upgrade the quality of its own communion."

"The church is supposed to be a sign and sacrament to the world of a communion that is real, not just a word," he said. "And if we aren't radiating some sense of being able to disagree and yet continue to love one another profoundly in Christ, then the world is not receiving the sign that God instituted the church for in the first place."

To a question about how the church can speak with a more united voice that resists partisanship, Flores said all Catholics have to "look at the beam in their own eyes."

"The faith sometimes calls us to an obedience that's beyond what politics envisions," he said. "The world pressures us very much to take a side and be with the winning team."

McElroy said that Catholics should always be conflicted when they vote because "Catholic social teaching bisects our current party structure."

"For every believing Catholic, voting is an act of conscience and an act of citizenship and an act of faith," he said. "But it's one that we should not be going into with a sense of victory ... because no one encapsulates even the bulk of what the church calls us to be and do and work for in our society."

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