Opinion
Editorial



Republican presidential nominee and former President Donald Trump joins Republican vice presidential nominee Sen. JD Vance of Ohio during Day 1 of the Republican National Convention at the Fiserv Forum, July 15 in Milwaukee. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

by NCR Editorial Staff

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

November 1, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Republican candidates Donald Trump and JD Vance have been spreading lies about immigrants in the United States as a cornerstone of their campaign. There is no other word that applies to the vile and easily provable untruths they spew.

The fallout from Trump's hateful rhetoric and his promise to conduct a massive deportation will persist beyond Nov. 5 no matter who wins. The former president has fashioned a narrative and planted it so successfully in the public imagination that it will impose itself on any discussion of immigration well into the future.

It is a narrative that poses a lethal threat at the heart of Catholic social teaching, an open dare to those whose faith finds Trump's language and intent repulsive.

So what are we Catholics to do? We, for whom the very substance of our faith is not in public piety or escape from the world but in compassion for the lost, the homeless, the abandoned, for those seeking refuge from state violence and poverty.

The shameful silence of our Catholic leaders has been beyond deafening.

The falsehoods propagated by Trump and Vance have a special consequence for Catholics. The powerful declarations by Jesus in our sacred texts about where the proof of our faith lies all are rooted in how we treat the stranger, the least among us, those considered outcasts, those who are hungry, need clothing and shelter. Our neighbor, as the tale of the good Samaritan makes clear, is the destitute and beaten traveler left to languish on the side of the road.

Advertisement

The texts are the foundation of Catholic social teaching, from the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* promulgated in 1891 through every succeeding papacy and especially today, with Pope Francis' unyielding and insistent advocacy for migrants from the very opening months of his pontificate.

The Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., or CLINIC, an organization founded decades ago by the U.S. bishops, notes that Catholic teaching "recognizes a range of human rights for newcomers, based on their God-given dignity that extends far beyond those recognized by individual nations or international bodies."

Further, the church "teaches that civil authority draws its legitimacy from protecting and defending human rights and the 'common good of the entire human family.' In this context, service to newcomers constitutes an obligation to persons of faith, not an option."

Yet our feckless religious leaders have concluded they have another option: shamefully sitting out this battle in silence, on the sidelines.

Read this next: 60 years of courage and commentary, but no endorsements

No version of the immigration lies is more instructive than the ongoing use by Trump and Vance of the calumny that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, are eating neighbors' dogs and cats and otherwise causing a major disruption to life in that community.

The women behind the false accusations publicly admitted their error and expressed deep regrets for the problems they caused the Haitian community. Officials at the local and state levels, including the Republican governor, have deemed as utterly false the story and the characterizations of Haitians legally residing in that community. Springfield is the national story writ small, an example of what happens when public leaders spend their political capital ginning up hate.



A mural adorns a wall in the city of Springfield, Ohio, on Sept. 11. (OSV News/ Reuters/Julio-Cesar Chavez)

The Republican nominees have chosen not to let a rampaging viral lie go to waste. Vance, confronted with the truth, engaged in a kind of language alchemy.

"The American media totally ignored this stuff until Donald Trump and I started talking about cat memes," he said, according to an NPR report. "If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do."

How noble. Except that the suffering only became greater for the targets of his defamation. As a result, the town of Springfield experienced numerous bomb threats and new levels of fear.

We know the bishops have pronounced incessantly and spent untold millions attempting to change attitudes and laws regarding such issues as abortion and contraception. On the matter of immigration lies, their comments have been few and

hardly adequate to the attacks on this vulnerable population.

Why, then, the silence on this life issue?

> Our bishops have yet to call out the lies and the liars.
>
> Tweet this

Immigration is not about individual conscience wrestling with whether to contravene church teaching. No, this is about a former president seeking a second term who would use the power of office and the instruments of the state to mandate inhumanity toward millions of immigrants among us.

Will we be required to stand by and simply witness the vilification of others, many of whom now attend our churches? Will we be forced to witness gratuitous insults like "floating island of garbage in the middle of the ocean," a reference to Puerto Rico made at Trump's Madison Square Garden rally? Is it our lot to stand by helplessly and accept the worst that can be said of — and the worst consequences for — the most vulnerable among us?

Silence.

Our bishops have yet to call out the lies and the liars. They have failed to use whatever moral authority they possess to counter the calumny. They have abandoned immigrants, whom they so often and proudly claim as our own, and left them vulnerable to fickle political winds and the awesome power of the state.

In their silence, do they give consent?

Editor's note: *This editorial was published on Friday, Nov. 1, after it went to press on Wednesday, Oct. 30 in NCR's Nov. 8-21, 2024, edition. After publication, a copy/paste error was inadvertently added to the end of the editorial with copy from a guest voices piece scheduled for Monday, Nov. 4. The commentary by John Kenneth White can be read here. We apologize for the error and have removed the paragraphs from this editorial.*

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Nov. 8-21, 2024** print issue under the headline: Bishops silent as Trump, Vance lie about immigrants.