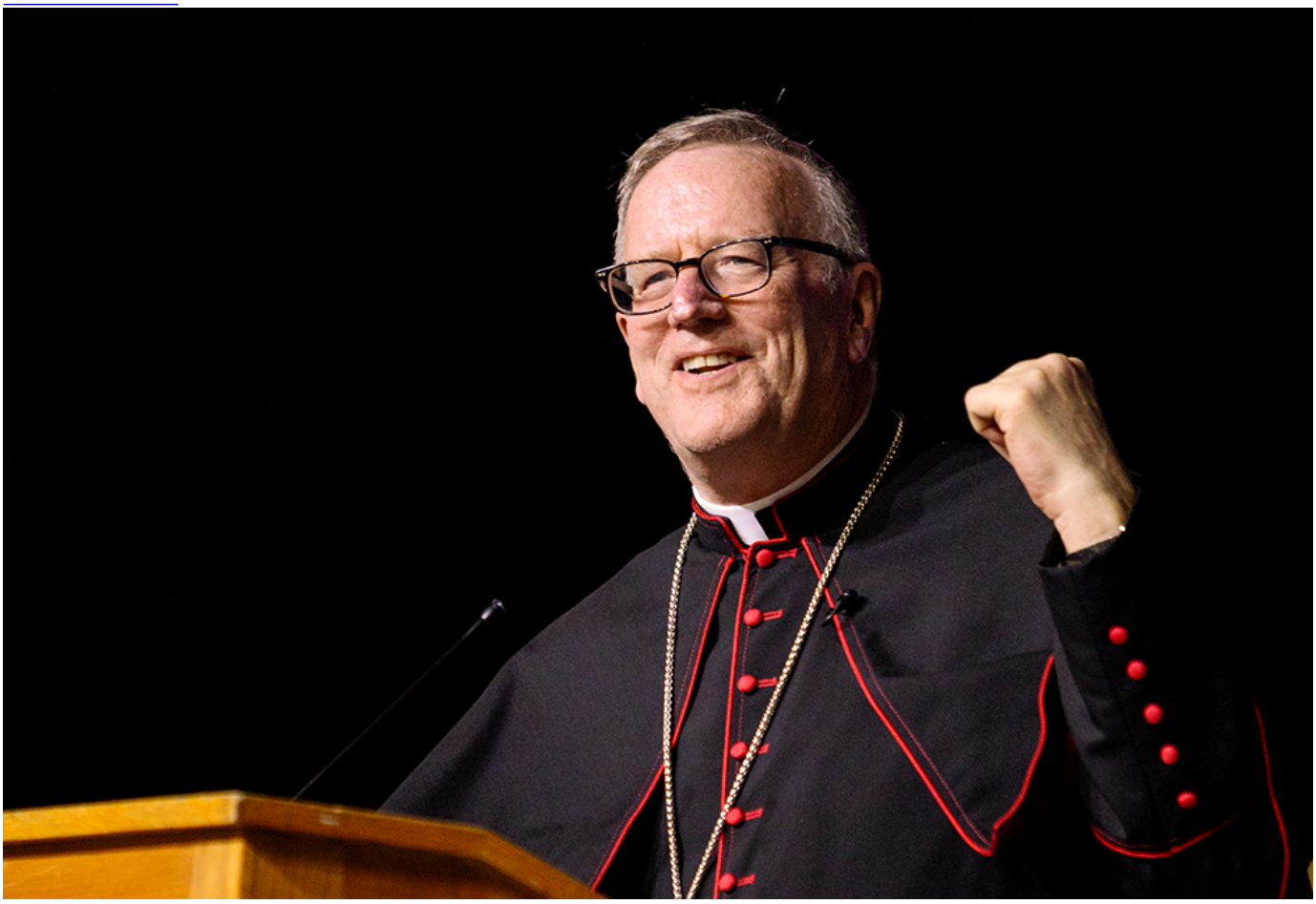
Opinion
NCR Voices



Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minn., speaks at the Star of the North Eucharistic Congress at the Sanford Center in Bemidji, Minn., May 18, 2024. (OSV News/Courtney Meyer)



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(NCR graphic/Angie Von Slaughter)

Friends, we need to talk about Bishop Robert Barron.

Known for his tendency to use his extraordinary social media apparatus to comment on any perceived Catholic slight, his absence in the face of the Trump administration's anti-Catholic policies is jarring.

But not surprising.

Barron has had no problem jumping into the social media fray to debate the finer points of "Star Wars," correct the governor of New York about theology during the height of a pandemic, or criticize the use of a John Lennon song during the funeral of the "world's most famous Sunday School teacher," Jimmy Carter.

But what does the bishop have to say when millions of people might suffer or die due to cuts to Catholic Relief Services meted out by the Trump administration?

Silence.

How did he respond when the pope stepped in to implicitly urge bishops to condemn President Donald Trump's mass deportation plans as a "major crisis"?

Crickets.

When that papal letter asked U.S. bishops to defend migrants, while the pontiff directly and plainly rejected what Michael Sean Winters dubbed the hillbilly theology of the author of *Hillbilly Elegy*?

Barron's juggernaut organization published a defense of Vice President JD Vance's convoluted theology.

In the 2010s, one could argue that Barron was the face of Catholicism. After launching his evangelical ministry Word on Fire in 2000, Barron quickly gained national attention for his simplified explanations of core Catholic concepts and use of Christian apologetics to passionately defend church teaching.

Barron's success was meteoric. It is impossible to consume Catholic media without seeing something with Word on Fire's branding. Twenty-five years later, there are Word on Fire podcasts, blogs, books, TV shows, articles, videos and social media posts.

Barron was made bishop, in part, due to his efforts with Word on Fire. He has millions of followers on social media platforms. There is a Word on Fire religious order in the works. Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised to see Word on Fire pajamas made available for purchase.

> Can you imagine if Bishop Barron advocated for the poor who will suffer throughout the world as passionately as he railed against feminism in 'Star Wars'?
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Despite his vast and powerful media apparatus, it appears that Barron's cultural and ecclesiological relevance is waning. His installation as bishop of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, was seen as a demotion by many in the church, and Word on Fire experienced a marked exodus in 2022, with workers leaving due to "a workplace culture they say has been warped by secrecy and hypermasculinity."

Men are 60% of Barron's YouTube viewers, according to a December 2024 article in The Atlantic. Barron has made strange bedfellows with provocateurs Ben Shapiro and Jordan Peterson, thus casting his lot in with two personalities known for their toxic masculinity. He's also interviewed and confirmed Shia LaBeouf, who was accused of sexual battery and physical abuse.

Barron is also a staunch critic of feminism. Nobody was more upset about "Star Wars: The Last Jedi" than Barron, a former Los Angeles auxiliary bishop, who posted an article and a video about how the moviemakers were "overwhelmed by an aggressively feminist ideology."

After his anti-woman-in-leadership rant concluded, Barron took to the comments to passionately argue exactly why his post was not riddled with fragile masculinity. He was so moved by the "Star Wars" franchise's alleged decline that Barron implored his followers to "read and share" in each post about the movie.

Can you imagine if Barron advocated for the poor who will suffer throughout the world as passionately as he railed against feminism in "Star Wars"?

Barron's interventions feel increasingly out of the mainstream and desperate — carefully curated to plug into an event of maximum cultural outrage to further his own culture war agenda. It's a great way to generate clicks and fuel a cult of personality, but not to preach the Gospel.

During the outcry around the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence's rescinded and then reinstated appearance at the Los Angeles Dodgers' Pride Night in 2023, Barron wasted no time in jumping into the fray about the comedy troupe that parodies the church. Less than 10 days after the event, Barron published his tirade on Facebook (3 million followers) saying that it was hard to imagine "anything more offensive than some of the behavior of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which I think can only be described as an anti-Catholic hate group."

I guess a charity group that parodies religious women by dressing in drag is more offensive to the bishop than children dying of hunger.

When the opening ceremony at the Paris Olympics featured a controversial drag-queen portrayal reminiscent of the Last Supper, Barron responded immediately with a video slamming the event: "Would they ever dare to mock Islam in the same way. ... I think we all know the answer to that." He concludes: "We should resist. We

should make our voices heard."

Just not about immigrants and refugees.

Two days later, Barron published another video, starting with a pat on his own back for his first video going viral, and then slamming the Paris Olympics organizing committee's statement for its "woke duplicity," ending with yet another call to action.

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Lest you think that Barron's outrage machine was turned off, might I remind you of his feud with the song "Imagine" by John Lennon? Though his vendetta against the song is not new, Barron was triggered once more during Carter's funeral. Despite the 39th president specifically requesting the song for his funeral, Barron couldn't resist tweeting his disgust that very day, hours after the services concluded.

"This was not only an insult to the memory of a devoutly believing Christian but also an indicator of the spinelessness of too much of established religion in our country," he posted on X (319,000 followers).

Since Trump was inaugurated as the 47th president of the United States, Barron's impassioned digital defense of Catholic teaching has gone silent, with two notable exceptions — both applauding Trump's executive orders on banning gender-affirming care for transgender children and banning transgender women from women's sports.

As Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities are experiencing existential threats that the Vatican says will imperil the lives of millions, Barron has lifted not one stroke of a pen to defend them. Instead, he posted about his interview with Trevor Williams. Real Catholic families are hurting because of this government, and Barron is using his immense platform to talk about baseball and re-share his 2007 video review of the movie "The Departed."

Barron was one of the definitive voices and alleged defenders of American Catholicism for 20 years. Why is he silent?

As an ordinary of a diocese, Barron is vested with canonical authority to preach the Gospel. What he says and does online holds more gravitas than your average Catholic influencer or Twitter priest by virtue of his office — an office given to him because of his evangelical apparatus. Why is he spending his time as a keyboard warrior on a crusade against feminism and the song "Imagine"? Where is his prophetic voice in advocating for the "least of these" as Jesus commanded in Matthew 25?

The humanitarian implications of the Trump administration are potentially catastrophic. Barron could be advocating for those battered and bruised instead of making videos with their would-be oppressors. He has a field hospital to tend to, yet he's too busy mocking the patients.

NCR sent emails to Bishop Barron seeking comment. The response?

We are still trying to get a comment.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** and **Digital Dunces** feature series.