Opinion
Editorial



Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, speaks during the July 20, 2024, revival night of the National Eucharistic Congress at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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Bishop Robert Barron, founder of the juggernaut Catholic media organization Word on Fire, will be stepping into the flames of our national politics today both as a special guest at President Trump's first joint address to Congress since being reelected, and as celebrant of a Mass for federal legislators prior to the speech.

From a distance, the invitation appears to be a curious occurrence coming from a freshman member of the House of Representatives, Rep. Riley Moore, Republican of West Virginia, to the bishop of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota. However the two connected, Barron said he is grateful for the invitation. "I look forward to this opportunity both as a Catholic bishop and as an avid student of American history," he said on the X social media platform where he has nearly 325,000 followers.

Invitations into the corridors of power can be perilously seductive, but certainly Barron, with all of his internet savvy and understanding of U.S. history, is well aware of the pitfalls.

Perhaps he is grateful for the propitious opportunity to speak truth to the powerful in this daunting national moment. To date, he has been oddly silent about the issues that are of greatest concern to his brother bishops and his pope.

Maybe he was just waiting for the moment that would provide the greatest effect.



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during the annual National Prayer Breakfast at the U.S. Capitol Feb. 6 in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

Homily helps are abundantly available. Let us offer a homily help to his excellency. It is rare that the heart of our Gospel speaks so clearly and unambiguously to current politics. As representative of the U.S. Catholic Church, Barron need only refer to the various statements issued by fellow Catholic leaders on behalf of immigrants, as well as those about Catholic efforts to aid the most desperate in other parts of the globe. They flesh out the Gospel in real time.

Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. bishops' conference listed what he called deeply troubling elements of the president's agenda: the treatment of immigrants and refugees, foreign aid, expansion of the death penalty, and the environment. These policies, Broglio said, "will have negative consequences, many of which will harm the most vulnerable among us."

Should anyone question the legitimacy or correctness of the widespread concerns among U.S. bishops, Pope Francis issued a letter affirming their alarm and implicitly scolding them for failing to speak out more forcefully. In an eloquent and highly unusual communication, he pleaded with U.S. Catholics to reject the narrative upon which the Trump administration is basing its mass deportation campaign.

Barron might also want to slip into his homily a note of support for Cardinal Robert McElroy, who arrived at the chancery in Hyattsville, Maryland, this week and will be installed later this month as the new archbishop of Washington. McElroy, in a recent prayer service, condemned the mass deportation scheme: "We must speak up and proclaim that this unfolding misery and suffering and, yes, war of fear and terror cannot be tolerated in our midst."



Cardinal Robert McElroy addresses reporters Feb. 27 at the San Diego Archdiocesan Pastoral Center in his final news conference as San Diego's Catholic spiritual leader.(NCR photo/Chris Stone)

Barron might also mention the distress of major church organizations — Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities and the United States office of Jesuit Refugee Services. They can provide compelling and deeply disturbing witness to the devastation and human suffering from the administration's cutoff of foreign aid.

We might suggest Barron also refer to the experience of two recent popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, who lived under dictators, to challenge the administration's distortions of the truth regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine — and warn against Trump's penchant for buddying up to the homicidal authoritarian, Vladimir Putin.

Nothing good can come from cozying up to brutal dictators. As we wrote earlier this year, silence in the face of Trump's cruelty is complicity.

The church in the United States is being called to an unusual moment of witness in the public square. The call is for nothing less than to confront the cold cruelty resulting from deliberate policies to demonize the most vulnerable at home and to turn our backs on the most desperate abroad.

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We remain baffled by Barron's silence. God has given the bishop a social media megaphone, a bully pulpit, a powerful platform that he chooses to use to engage in the most divisive, ideological culture war nonsense while looking askance from the most vulnerable in society. We sincerely pray for Barron, that God gives him the courage to speak these truths of the Gospel while visiting our nation's capital.

Or, Barron might continue to ignore all of those difficult topics and the consensus of his brother bishops and Pope Francis. If he does, he would simply become one more clerical chump manipulated and exploited by the far right in exchange for a few fleeting moments in the balcony of the House of Representatives during a joint session of Congress, and an attaboy from Trump, Vice President JD Vance and their band of bullies.

If the bishop of Winona-Rochester were to take on the difficult issues and speak the tough truths of the Gospel, fleshed out in modern times in the church's social teachings, he might risk the legislators' displeasure. That degree of courage might even get him disinvited from the speech.

Talk about the word on fire.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.