Opinion
NCR Voices



Then-Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron addresses the 2015 World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia. Now bishop of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester, Barron founded Word on Fire in 2007. (CNS/Jeffrey Bruno)



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Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea máxima culpa. In my column last Friday, while focusing on the repeated emphasis Pope Leo XIV has placed on listening, I wrote the following:

> Also worth noting is the absence of listening in various social media ministries such as Bishop Robert Barron's Word on Fire. There, the answers are prepackaged and ready to be shared with the docile audience. That is not Leo's approach.

I apologize to both Bishop Barron and to my readers. I hurled a throwaway line at him and he is a substantial person. He deserves more than what reads like a Twitter rant.

So, briefly, here is why I view Barron's ministry as problematic for the church in the U.S.

First, I stand by the charge that there is no evidence of Barron listening to anyone. When I say his answers are "prepackaged" I mean that they seem immune to dialogue or development based on genuine listening. Increasingly, social media's promise to "democratize" discussion has wilted, replaced by the fact that social media increases vituperation, not dialogue and makes it easy for people to find others with the same views, rather than come into contact with people of diverse views.

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Second, Barron is too one-sided in his critique of the culture. He may lament the sexual revolution, but he is a little slow to raise even the slightest question about the rise in authoritarian populism in our country, or the deep and negative effects that affluence has on Christian discipleship. He cozies up with some really

repugnant, always rightwing, avatars such as Tucker Carlson and Jordan Peterson and never challenges them. Barron never seems to connect with extreme left-leaning media types.

In short, he has become a partisan and partisans are always more complicit with the culture than they care to acknowledge. The line between engagement and complicity is sometimes a thin one, but Barron seems to jump over it without even realizing it is there.

Third, Barron may voice concerns about the culture wars, but he is the first to get all hot and bothered about things best ignored. Remember last summer's Olympic opening ceremonies? In one scene that happened so quickly I did not even notice it in real time, a group of actors in drag assembled themselves in a manner akin to da Vinci's "Last Supper." I am sure the intent was to provoke. I am not sure why Barron took the bait and made it a cause célèbre.

The contretemps over the Paris opening ceremonies got a lot of clicks, and here we come to my biggest concern about Barron's ministry. If the goal of all Catholic ministries is to preach the Gospel, and the preacher entangles himself in the culture wars, who gets attracted to that preaching? What is the image of the church that is presented and how many people does it turn off?

What is more, Paris has an archbishop. Why did Barron feel the need to insinuate himself in the controversy? Social media has eliminated many diocesan boundaries. What if a brother bishop doesn't want Barron's approach coming into his diocese? What can be done? With so much focus on his media ministry, who is minding the shop in Minnesota where Barron is a diocesan bishop? His duties as the bishop of Winona-Rochester certainly did not require his presence in Rome during the time between the death of Pope Francis and the election of Pope Leo XIV. Why was he there? It was a question several of us got asked by our non-American colleagues in the press corps.

Barron is, arguably, the best apologist for the Catholic faith in America today, at least for a significant segment of the population. But apologetics and evangelization are different things. His very public media ministry raises important questions about ecclesial governance that the U.S. bishops and the Holy See need to confront. I wish him well, but he turns off as many people as he attracts, and I am one of the former.

This special column is from Winters' weekly Tuesday newsletter that hit inboxes June 10. You can sign up here.