Opinion
NCR Voices



John Carr, founder of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, smiles during a panel discussion May 31, 2017, at the Jesuit-run university in Washington. (CNS/Georgetown University/Rafael Suanes)



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January 19, 2026
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Retirement parties are not breaking news. And the retirement of a self-described "church bureaucrat" isn't the kind of thing that would normally warrant much in the way of commentary. But when the bureaucrat in question is John Carr, people should stop and take note.

Carr has spent the last 13 years as the founder and director of Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life. Before that, he worked for more than two decades as the director of the offices on justice and peace at the U.S. bishops' conference. During that time, he organized interfaith groups like the Circle of Protection to defend anti-poverty programs from government austerity measures.

If you are familiar with the workings of bureaucracies, you know that such a long tenure involved countless meetings, hundreds of thousands of memos and reports to write (and even more to read), Zoom calls and, before Zoom, phone calls, most of which were something less than exciting. In short, it was work, hard work, sometimes tedious, work requiring an enormous sense of dedication and perseverance.

The result? It can be safely said that no U.S. Catholic living today has done more to help poor people in this country than John Carr.

"Working for the bishops he pushed and prodded multiple presidential administrations and countless Congressional offices with great success," Stephen Schneck, chair of the U.S. Committee on International Religious Freedom, and former professor of politics at the Catholic University of America, said in an email to me. "He was one of the founders of the Circle of Protection, a committee of prominent faith leaders working for laws that protect and care for the neediest and most vulnerable Americans. In his decades in Washington John's been on the front lines as the church has pushed for racial justice, care for Creation, health care for all, an end to the death penalty, peacemaking, and always with an absolutely profound commitment to the sanctity of life."

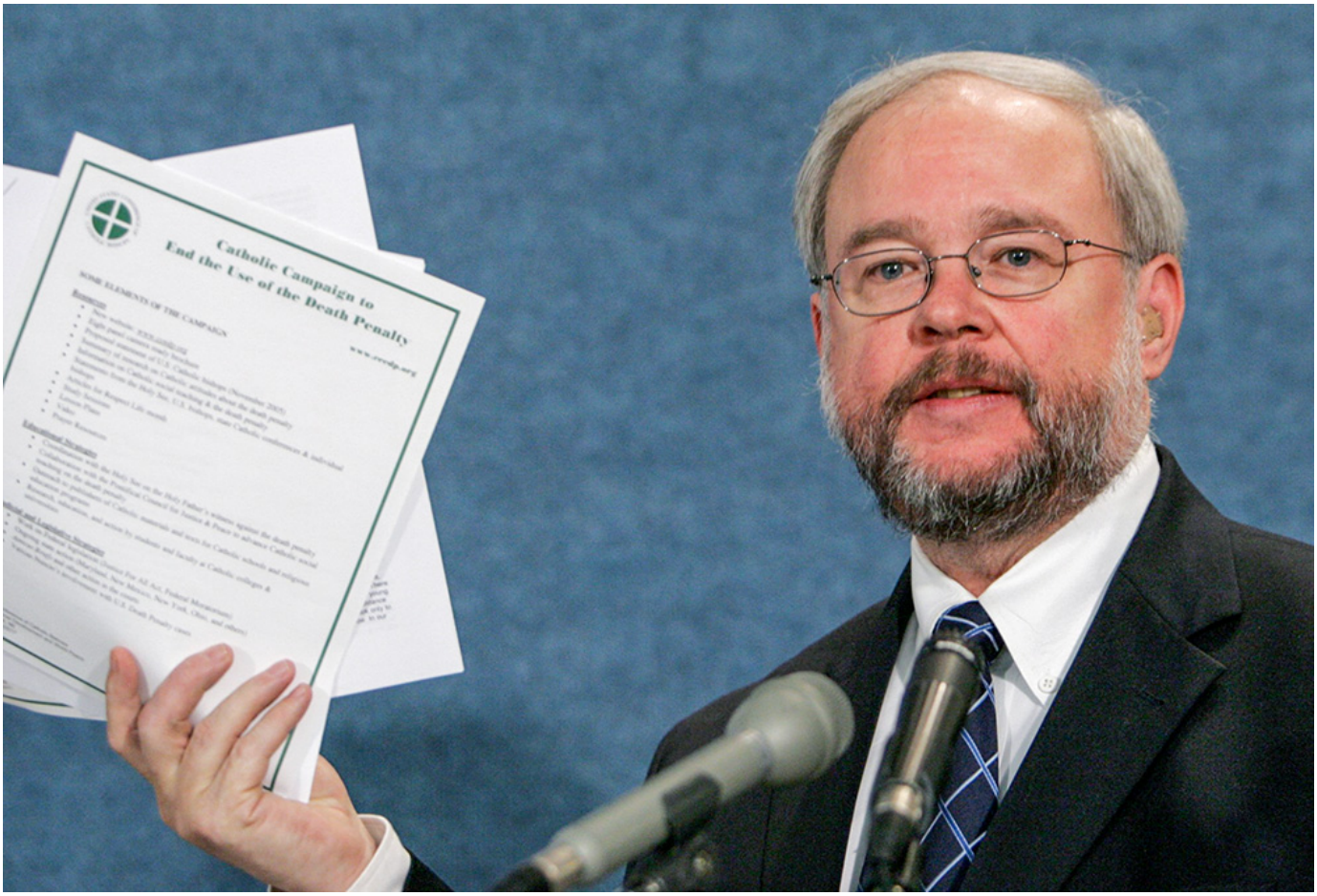
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"In my lifetime in Washington, there has never been a more effective voice for the church in the corridors of power than John Carr," Schneck added.

Why was Carr so effective? In part, of course, it was diligence. In part, it was his mastery of Catholic social doctrine. In part, because fidelity is always fruitful. In part, a profound understanding of political relationships and the role of the church in those relationships at a time when the role of Catholicism in society was changing significantly. But, arguably, the biggest reason for Carr's success is that he is a mensch.

"John Carr is one of those few people whom I would commit a felony for," another famous D.C. mensch, E.J. Dionne, told me years ago, before quickly adding, "Fortunately, I know he'd never ask me to do that."

Dionne has known Carr for more than three decades and will participate in a public dialogue at Georgetown Wednesday night, Jan. 21. You can register to attend in person or for the livestream here. Dionne will be joined by The New York Times' David Brooks, Catholic Charities USA President Kerry Robinson, and Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey. Not a bad lineup for a church bureaucrat.



John Carr, then executive director of the U.S. bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, speaks at a press conference in Washington in 2005. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"John has the heart of St. Francis and the political shrewdness of Nancy Pelosi or Jim Farley," Dionne said in an email. "He has always been on the side of the angels — and the least among us — but always understood that building coalitions among imperfect human beings can be a very messy task. One of John's secret weapons was laughter, which he could direct at himself, at the hierarchy, and at both political parties."

At Georgetown, Carr convened 32 gatherings of young Latino leaders and more than 200 events. "John founded the Initiative just after Pope Francis was elected, and the timing couldn't have been better," his successor, Kim Daniels, told me. "The themes of Francis' pontificate — calling the Church to encounter, dialogue, and renewal as a poor Church for the poor — are themes that have been at the heart of John's work, themes that he emphasized again and again here at Georgetown. At a time when

some failed to rise to the occasion and embrace Pope Francis' pastoral priorities, John made sure that the Initiative was a place dedicated to emphasizing and echoing Francis' — and now Leo's — call for a Church committed to the least and the lost."

I learned many things from Carr. He recognized long before me the high cost of Catholics abandoning core moral teachings about public life because of political pressure, whether it was the Catholic left's abandoning the struggle to protect the unborn or the Catholic right's leaving the poor to fend for themselves. He taught me that you can't understand the bishops' conference without understanding the relationships the bishops have with each other, many tracing back to their seminary days, and that relationships were always as important, or more so, than a persuasive argument.

More than anything, John taught me, and so many others, that there is no issue in American society that is not made more humane by encountering the leaven of Catholic teaching. His life of commitment and fidelity is a lesson in lay discipleship. "You can't talk about the intersection of Catholic faith and public life in this country over the last five decades without talking about John Carr," said Daniels, and she is exactly right.