News



John Carr speaks at a Georgetown University event in Oct. 2025. (Video screen grab)



Aleja Hertzler-McCain

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

Washington — January 23, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

After decades of rubbing elbows with Washington and Catholic powerbrokers, working to further the Catholic Church's social principles, John Carr has collected some stories. One he is willing to tell on the record goes like this: In the 1990s, Carr is in an elevator at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops headquarters, and a woman asks him what he does for the conference. He responds that he leads their justice and peace work.

"You're not doing a very good job," she tells him.

On Wednesday (Jan. 21), Cardinal Joseph Tobin, the archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, took a moment at a celebration of Carr's retirement after 50 years of work for the church to reassure Carr that the difficult moments showed not that he was "a glutton for punishment," the cardinal said. "I think you're a man of faith."

"To see up close and personally the church's defects and to keep at it, that's fabulous," Tobin told Carr at Georgetown University, where Carr was until last month co-director of the school's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, which he founded in 2013.

Carr's association with the U.S. Catholic bishops was not only long, it was effective. While he led their peace and justice advocacy, the bishops successfully advocated for the Family and Medical Leave Act, for the child tax credit to become partially refundable, for the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and various other development assistance and social safety-net policies.

He also helped found organizations that play key roles in faith-based social justice advocacy, including the Circle of Protection and the Coalition on Human Needs, which work on poverty issues; the Catholic Climate Covenant and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment; the Catholic Mobilizing Network, which opposes the death penalty; and The National Association of Catholic Social Action

and Mission. The Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life has hosted more than 200 dialogues and gatherings.

Carr also worked for individual archdioceses and was executive director for the White House Conference on Families under President Jimmy Carter. He worked on employment issues with Coretta Scott King and was a residential fellow at Harvard University's Institute of Politics.

"Over a lifetime, John Carr has given flesh and blood to the Sermon on the Mount," Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich told RNS, "not only by literally rolling up his sleeves to meet the needs of the marginalized standing before him, but also through his uniquely gifted and articulated advocacy, which has served as a rallying cry for others to join him."

Cupich, who graduated from the St. John Vianney Seminary in Minnesota three years before Carr, said that knowing Carr for more than half a century has been "a great blessing to me that has been nothing less than a steady reminder of the things that really matter in life."

Carr has said that in his childhood he had planned to be either a priest or a senator. But while exploring a vocation for the priesthood in seminary high school, he was sexually abused by two priests and a religious brother. He worked for the bishops from 1989 to 2012, as the church was rocked by revelations about the extent of sexual abuse in the church. Those failures took their toll, he said. "It was sort of hollowing out my soul," he told RNS.

Advertisement

That contributed to a struggle with alcoholism, which had a long history in his family. In 1985, Carr went into treatment on Holy Saturday, at a time when Catholics are liturgically waiting for Jesus' resurrection. In confession on Good Friday before he entered treatment, he said he told "the holiest Jesuit I could find" that he wanted his first two weeks in treatment to be about alcohol and the second two weeks to be about separating his faith and his work.

He has been sober for two decades. " I am not deep spiritually, but the Serenity Prayer is a great guide for me and for others that basically says, I'm not in charge, but I have responsibility," he said.

A newer threat to the church, Carr believes, is the growing polarization that has made politicians' photo ops more prevalent than meeting and negotiations with policymakers. " We're caught in an ideological and political meltdown, where dialogue and compromise is almost impossible," Carr said. "It's really hard to break through."

But even as that polarization has spread to the church, leading to a campaign against Catholic Charities and criticism of Catholic social teaching, Carr remains hopeful. " In the end, the work will win out. People will recognize this is the Gospel at work."

" In tough times, I think you go back to the fundamentals," he said. "For us in the Catholic community, unity begins with a person, Jesus Christ," and with the moral principles of his teaching.

" With Leo, and after Trump, and I would like to think that the Catholic community in the United States could unite around the idea of human dignity for the unborn, for the undocumented, for the poor and vulnerable, for people on death row, for the hungry of the world," Carr said.

At his retirement event, Cardinal Robert McElroy, archbishop of Washington, described Carr as embodying the biblical figure of the persistent widow, who continues to bother a judge until she gets justice. Through his years at the bishops' conference, McElroy said Carr had an "ability to work with all of us and bring us in our scattered ways to unity so many times."

For Ralph McCloud, Carr recalls most the parable of the lost sheep. McCloud, who was hired by Carr and who led the bishops' domestic anti-poverty program for 16 years, said he and Carr often attend Nationals baseball games together and remembers that when Carr saw homeless people in the parking lot, " He would always make a point of veering from our path and going over to greet that person and give them money before they even had a chance to ask," said McCloud. "He was very consistent with it."

McCloud, now a fellow at NETWORK, a lobby founded by Catholic sisters, said Carr "wants to make sure the unheard voices or voices that may have been squelched … are at the table."

The Georgetown initiative, the last act of Carr's career, was a way to intertwine his love for leadership development, dialogue and Catholic social teaching. In that work, diversity has been " an obligation, not an option," Carr said. More than half of the participants in the dialogues have been women, and almost half have been racial and ethnic minorities.

Kim Daniels, who has succeeded Carr as executive director of the initiative, said at his retirement that "one of John's greatest contributions has been to mentor and encourage young leaders." The initiative is honoring Carr by fundraising for programming that encourages young people to be leaders in advancing Catholic social teaching.

Lily Nguyen, a graduate student fellow for the initiative last fall, told RNS, "The initiative's strength lies in its relationships, in the trust and authenticity that allow difficult conversations to happen, and John Carr embodied that relational leadership.

"His legacy is not only the dialogues he convened, but the community he built that made them endure," she said.

Carr, who frequently speaks affectionately about his wife, Linda, his four children and 10 grandchildren, said the first thing he will do after retirement " is just sit back and relax a little."