

A Christian Answer to Trump and Trumpism Is Finally Here

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By David French, Opinion Columnist

Last week, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a “special message” on immigration that was an unmistakable rebuke of the Trump administration and its cruel and punitive immigration crackdown. The message did not mention President Trump by name, but its meaning could not have been clearer.

By a vote of 216 to 5, with three abstentions, the bishops approved a statement that said, in part: “We are disturbed when we see among our people a climate of fear and anxiety around questions of profiling and immigration enforcement. We are saddened by the state of contemporary debate and the vilification of immigrants.”

The bishops also opposed “the indiscriminate mass deportation of people” and prayed for “an end to dehumanizing rhetoric and violence, whether directed at immigrants or at law enforcement.”

A number of bishops also read the statement out loud in a powerful video message posted on YouTube.

The bishops were following the lead of Pope Leo XIV, who has raised a number of specific objections to the Trump administration’s treatment of migrants. In September, the pope told journalists, “Someone who says I am against abortion but I am in agreement with the inhuman treatment of immigrants in the United States, I don’t know if that’s pro-life.”

On Nov. 4, journalists asked the pope specifically about the treatment of detainees at the ICE facility in Broadview, Ill. Federal officials had denied entry to the facility to a delegation that included a Catholic bishop who hoped to offer communion to the inmates inside.

The pope responded with an appeal to Scripture: “Jesus says very clearly at the end of the world, we’re going to be asked, you know, how did you receive the foreigner? Did you receive him and welcome him or not? And I think that there’s a deep reflection that needs to be made in terms of what’s happening.”

This isn’t the first time that the Republican immigration crackdown has clashed with Catholic religious liberty. In January, I highlighted a disturbing case in Texas, where the attorney general, Ken Paxton, was directly attacking the religious freedom rights of the Annunciation House, a religious nonprofit founded by Catholics in El Paso. Paxton made the remarkable argument that blocking Annunciation House from providing food, shelter and clothing to migrants would not substantially burden its free exercise of religion.

Serving the most marginalized is fundamental to the Christian faith. By one count, more than 2,000 scriptural passages mandate or endorse service to the poor and the work of justice. In May, just after the pope’s election, I wrote that the most important American in the world was no longer named Donald Trump. The president has less than four years left at the center

of the international stage. The pope will present a global moral witness for years to come, and it's a moral witness that is fundamentally incompatible with the cruelty and corruption of Trumpism.

If you examine the new pope's pronouncements, there is a consistent through line. He defends human dignity and condemns government brutality. In addition to his defense of the human rights of migrants, he's decried Russian abuses in Ukraine, and he's called for a cease-fire, hostage release and compliance with international humanitarian law in Gaza.

His concern for human dignity extends to the world of technology and commerce as well. On Nov. 7, for example, he posted on social media: "Technological innovation can be a form of participation in the divine act of creation. It carries an ethical and spiritual weight, for every design choice expresses a vision of humanity. The Church therefore calls all builders of #AI to cultivate moral discernment as a fundamental part of their work—to develop systems that reflect justice, solidarity, and a genuine reverence for life."

The pope's comment drew an immediate rebuke from Marc Andreessen, a venture capitalist and Trump supporter, who posted (and then deleted) a meme mocking the pope's statement.

Each of the pope's statements is part of a consistent ethic of life. I love the Catholic writer Mark Shea's description of what this ethic means — that "all human beings, without any exception whatsoever, are made in the image and likeness of God and that Jesus Christ died for all human beings, without any exception whatsoever. Therefore, each human person — without any exception whatsoever — is sacred and is the only creature that God wills for its own sake."

In this formulation, the fundamental moral basis of the pro-life movement is the idea that every single human being is created in the image of God and thus should be treated with dignity and respect at every stage of life, a concept that includes abortion but extends far beyond it as well.

In this context, it is a mistake to view abortion as somehow distinct from the dehumanization and abuse of migrants. The holistic pro-life view doesn't just ask, "Is a baby being harmed?" It asks, "Are people being harmed?"

And make no mistake, people are being harmed. To take just one dreadful example, on Wednesday, The Guardian reported that two human rights groups had found that "more than 252 Venezuelans expelled to El Salvador under Donald Trump's mass deportation policy suffered systematic and prolonged torture and abuse, including sexual assault," during their detention at a notorious El Salvadoran prison named CECOT.

When I said that the path past Trumpism is beginning to emerge, I did not and do not mean that the pope will somehow enable the defeat of any particular politician or program at the ballot box. American Catholics are true swing voters. A majority voted for Trump in 2024, but a

majority disapprove of him now. And there are many devout Catholics who are deeply embedded in the MAGA movement, including Vice President JD Vance.

Partisanship is poisonous to the church. Neither party's political platform truly embodies the teachings of the New Testament. Each party has its moral strengths and weaknesses, which is why you can find Christians and people of every faith and no faith on both sides of the political aisle.

But when partisanship becomes part of your identity — much less part of your faith — it has a pernicious effect: It causes you to highlight the deficiencies of the other side while tempting you to rationalize or minimize the injustices on your own. Partisanship makes hypocrites of us all. I know it made a hypocrite of me on my worst partisan days.

The approach that Pope Leo takes, by contrast, puts virtue outside and above politics. His declarations are the living embodiment of **Martin Luther King Jr.**'s admonition that the church **"is not to be the master or the servant of the state, but the conscience of the state."**

I'm not Catholic, but I can see that the Catholic Church enjoys some profound advantages over the American evangelical church in taking King's approach. The Catholic Church is a global church that existed for more than a thousand years before the founding of America. American evangelicals, by contrast, often belong to churches and denominations that were founded in America, remain rooted in America, and they have a distinct, America-centered political worldview.

Sadly, this means that American evangelical influence is often rooted more in its partisan affiliations than in its moral witness. When Republicans dominate the government, evangelicals tend to feel more confident and secure. When Democrats win the White House, then evangelicals tend to feel more defensive and fearful, as if their churches are at the edge of extinction.

The result is a relentless one-way cultural ratchet that amplifies Democratic sins and minimizes Republican vices. It elevates politics to the place of religion because it is only through politics that many evangelicals can feel confident and secure in the practice of their faith.

This is why Trumpism is a thoroughly religious movement. Trump owes his political power to white evangelicals more than to any other group. In fact, according to exit polls, if you removed white evangelical votes from the 2024 presidential election, Trump would have lost in a 58-to-40 percent landslide, which would have been more than enough to turn the Electoral College in Kamala Harris's favor.

Since Trumpism is a religious phenomenon, it requires a religious answer. But it can't be a partisan answer. That's why it was wise for the bishops not to directly mention Trump in their statement. **The goal isn't to attack one man or one movement, but to uphold a particular set of values and to measure every politician — including politicians of your own party —**

by his or her dedication to the notion, as Mark Shea wrote, that “each human person — without any exception whatsoever — is sacred.”

If you’re a Republican in part because you believe that Democrats disregard the value of unborn life, that doesn’t mean that you abandon migrants to degrading and inhumane treatment because you don’t want to risk stoking outrage against the Republican Party and its leaders.

Conversely, it’s a profound mistake to swallow your tongue when Democrats advance permissive abortion rules because you’re worried that calling out, say, Chuck Schumer or Hakeem Jeffries will help Donald Trump.

I’m under no illusions that Pope Leo’s example will matter to the evangelical political class. It is so far gone that many of its leading lights advance the absurd claim that Christians cannot vote for Democrats.

But a pope’s moral witness can — and should — still matter to Christians of every tradition. The American evangelical church is one tributary to the broad stream of American (much less global) Christianity. There is an enormous amount of theological cross-pollination in the United States.

I know this because I’ve experienced it. Pope John Paul II’s seminal encyclical on the value of human life, *Evangelium Vitae*, has influenced me more than any Protestant book about the dignity of all human life. I grew up in an evangelical intellectual culture that saw Pope John Paul II’s opposition to the brutality of communism as an indispensable element in the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of liberal democracy in Eastern Europe.

In the words of Barbara Elliott, a fellow of the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, the pope achieved a “spiritual victory” over Soviet communism. He was the “spiritual leader of this peaceful revolution that shattered communism.”

Unless the values behind Trumpism are defeated, the man himself will be replaced by another like him — Republican or Democrat — and our culture will continue to slide into cruelty and depravity.

To quote Pope Leo, “justice, solidarity, and a genuine reverence for life” ought to be the touchstones of our public engagement. There is another spiritual victory to be won — this time over the forces of hatred, division and cruelty in these United States.

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