

The Catholic Church vs. the U.S. Government

Although framed portraits of John F. Kennedy were hung alongside portraits of Jesus in most American Catholic homes in the 1960's after his assassination, he was not a particularly exemplary Catholic. Leaving aside his philandering, his devotion to Catholicism was compromised by minimizing his faith during his campaign for president to ameliorate anti-Catholic sentiment. It worked. He became the first Catholic president.

From the 1850's and the first waves of Catholic immigrants to the United States, nativists distrusted and even persecuted Catholics because they believed that Catholics' allegiance would be to the Pope in Rome and not the President in Washington. In his campaign for president in 1960, Kennedy sought to calm those types of fears and prejudices. In a major speech he gave at the Greater Houston Ministerial Association he said, "I believe in a President whose religious views are his own private affair," after admitting that, "it is apparently necessary for me to state once again – not what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important *only to me* (my emphasis) – but what kind of America I believe in." He said he wanted to be a Chief Executive "whose fulfillment of his Presidential oath is not limited *or conditioned by any religious oath* (again, my emphasis), ritual or obligation."

President Kennedy seemed to go out of his way to assure the clergy in Houston that his Catholic faith would not conflict with the dominant culture, that they needn't worry about his being Catholic because it would not lead him to do anything that might upset the conduct of public affairs. In a way, with his election Catholics had "made it" in the United States. Although Catholicism was very distinct from American culture back in the days preceding the Kennedy presidency, particularly because it was a church of immigrants with strong ethnic identities, that degree of difference gradually disappeared in subsequent years until, it can be argued, Catholicism and American culture became indistinguishable.

That peaceful coexistence of Catholicism and American culture is changing before our very eyes. The fears of the nativists were well-founded as it turns out. There is a widening gap between the values the Catholic Church believes ought to be embodied in public policy and what is being promulgated and enforced by the federal government. The issue that is causing this split is, ironically and not surprisingly, immigration. From the top down, from the Pope to the faithful on the streets, the Catholic Church is taking a position that is opposed to the policies and practices of the United States government.

On October 4th, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Leo XIV published the Apostolic Exhortation, *Dilexit Te (I Have Loved You)*, a moving teaching on the Church's duty and mission to the poor in which he specifically mentions migrants. He wrote,

The Church's tradition of working for and with migrants continues. Our response to the challenges posed by contemporary migration can be summed up in four verbs: welcome, protect, promote and integrate. Every human being is a child of God! He or she bears the image of Christ! We ourselves need to see, and then to enable others to see, that migrants and refugees do not only represent a problem to be solved, but are brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved. The Church, like a mother, accompanies those who

are walking. Where the world sees threats, she sees children; where walls are built, she builds bridges. She knows that her proclamation of the Gospel is credible only when it is translated into gestures of closeness and welcome. And she knows that in every rejected migrant, it is Christ himself who knocks at the door of the community.

At the national level, Catholic leaders met at Georgetown University to criticize the federal government administration's aggressive immigration policies and their enforcement. They particularly protested immigration officers having been given permission to make arrests at schools and houses of worship. At the local level, Catholic pastors and parishioners have joined with other clergy and their congregations to pray and protest outside Immigration and Customs Enforcement offices. The Archbishop in San Diego is organizing people from the pews to accompany immigrants to school, medical appointments, and court as a means of support and protection.

So, yes, the nativists were prescient back in the nineteenth century. Catholics are choosing the Pope over the President. From a purely political point of view, this runs counter to the support shown by Catholics at the polls in the 2024 election. According to Pew Research, 55% of Catholics who voted, voted for Donald Trump. As the disconnect between what is coming out of the Vatican and what is coming out of Washington becomes more apparent to American Catholics, Catholic support for the president and his administration will lessen.

Uncovering this disconnect will depend on the ability of the teaching Church, that is, clergy, lay leaders, and theologians, to speak with authority and to regain some of the credibility lost in the clergy abuse scandals. Even more crucial for shifting support from the administration's immigration policies is the willingness of Catholics to be uncomfortable. After decades of trying not to be peculiar, Catholics will again have to stand out in contrast to the prevailing culture.

It is not only the average Catholic voter in the pews who are confronted with this divide. There are Catholics peppered throughout the federal government. Karoline Leavitt, the White House Press Secretary, is Catholic. Tom Homan, Border Czar, is Catholic. Supreme Court Justices John Roberts, Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Sonia Sotomayor, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett are Catholic. Vice-President James David Vance is Catholic. Secretary of State Marco Rubio is Catholic. John Ratcliffe, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, is Catholic. Sean Duffy, Secretary of Transportation, is Catholic. Lori Chavez-DeRemer, Secretary of Labor, is Catholic. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Secretary of Health and Human Services, is Catholic. Kelly Loeffler, Administrator of the Small Business Administration, is Catholic. Linda McMahon, Secretary of Education is Catholic. There are twenty-four Catholics in the U.S. Senate. There are one hundred twenty-six Catholics in the U.S. House of Representatives.

As much as faceless Catholics in the pews will be pressed to examine their consciences on the treatment of immigrants, these Catholic government figures are also challenged by the clear teaching of their Church. They may pretend that it is possible to conduct the business of the government without reference to their faith, invoking "separation of church and state" to excuse themselves from examining their actions with the eyes of faith. They may pretend that in the war of convictions they can be neutral Switzerland and somehow govern free of religious influence and devoid of any belief. They are fooling themselves. Every politician and office holder

operates from a set of beliefs, religious or secular. Their actions and justifications expose what they really believe.

It is stand-up-and-be-counted time for Catholics.

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