

Donald Trump is right – the Pope has no business interfering in the U.S. presidential campaign

The Pope's ill-considered comments about Donald Trump are of a piece with hysterical overreactions to him and his candidacy in this and other countries. No pope has ever overtly intervened in an American political campaign before. Such interventions are not historically uncommon in some places. Pius IX called the founder and chancellor of the German Empire, Bismarck, "Attila in a helmet," during the Kulturkampf, Bismarck's mad assault on the Roman Catholics and other episcopal churches in the 1870s. In living memory, Pius XII threatened excommunication against any Communist voter in the tightly contested Italian elections of 1948 and 1949. The pope did not himself utter the words, but the generally circulated reminder from the Holy See was "God sees you when you vote, but Stalin doesn't." The CIA and the Soviet government heavily supported the opposing sides financially. The Church-affiliated Christian Democrats won easily.

The only known intervention by the Roman Catholic leadership in U.S. elections were in 1936 and 1940. On the former occasion, the ravings of Father Charles E. Coughlin, the mellifluous Canadian-born radio priest, had become so irritating to then-president Franklin D. Roosevelt that Pope Pius XI sent the Vatican secretary of State, Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli (who would succeed the pope as Pius XII in 1939) to the United States for the entire election campaign, to enforce an instruction of public silence on Coughlin. Politics at this level and this time were very complicated, and the Holy See was grateful for Roosevelt's neutrality in the Spanish Civil War. The Vatican favoured the non-fascist Loyalists; Hitler

and Mussolini strongly supported the fascist Loyalists, led by General Francisco Franco. Stalin overtly supported the Communist Republicans. Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas supported the non-communist republicans and Britain and France subtly and ineffectually favoured them also. Roosevelt wasn't personally very well-disposed to either side; most Americans sympathized more with the Republicans, but 90 per cent of American Roman Catholics followed their Church in opposing the rabidly anti-clerical Republicans, and 80 per cent of American Roman Catholics voted for Roosevelt. This provided about 40 per cent of his electoral support, and much of his majorities in the great cities of the East and Midwest.

Roosevelt and Pius XI and Pius XII handled these explosive issues with exquisite discretion and their relations reached a high state of cordiality when New York's Archbishop Francis J. Spellman read a supportive message on national radio five nights before election day 1940, when the president broke a tradition as old as the republic and sought a third term. The message was read in every service in every Roman Catholic Church in the United States on the Sunday two days before the election, and included this endorsement of Roosevelt's program of assisting the democracies against Hitler and Mussolini: "It is better to have strength and not need it than to need it and not have it. America seeks peace, but not a peace that is a choice between slavery and death." This was an outright endorsement of Roosevelt's massive rearmament program and his extensive sales, on relaxed terms, of war supplies to Britain and Canada. The Roman Catholic Church from the pope to the faithful throughout America gave all they had for the president and he could not have asked for more. (Similar statements were read on the radio by a prominent Episcopalian clergyman and a senior rabbi, but the Protestants and Jews do not speak officially with one voice as Rome does.)



Filippo Monteforte / AFP, Getty Images Pope Francis at his

weekly general audience at St Peter's Square in the Vatican on December 16, 2015.

Pope Francis allegedly said, as he ended his visit to Mexico, that someone "who thinks only about building walls and not building bridges, is not Christian." This was an outrageous comment and is not the first time this Pope has blundered into dangerous secular territory. As a co-religionist of his I am grateful that he has deprived the Roman Catholic Church's enemies of their ability to joyously, as if attacking a piñata, represent Catholicism as a humbug and hypocrisy-disseminating operation unaccountably directed by a cabal of septuagenarian celibates and closeted gays scolding the world about its sex life. His other newsworthy utterance in Mexico was to condone the use of contraceptive devices to prevent the spread of disease. He stated that "Abortions are evil but the prevention of conception is not." This is not a new policy but continues the interdiction of anti-Catholic efforts to portray the Church as wholly preoccupied with persuading its adherents that any sexual activity not entirely in pursuit of procreation and between married people is anathema and damnation.

Donald Trump's reply to the Pope's comment was that it was "disgraceful;" that the Pope had no standing to say that he was not a Christian, that Donald is, he reasserted, "a proud Christian;" and that "no religious leader should have the right to question another man's religion or faith." He added that the Pope had been manipulated into such comments by his Mexican hosts. The Pope did say that he would give Trump "the benefit of the doubt." But there is no doubt that Trump is a Christian, he proclaims himself to be so, has been married in Christian ceremonies and his personal habits (he does not drink, smoke, touch drugs and rarely swears or blasphemes), and the manner in which he has raised his children, are all in entire conformity with middle-of-the-road Christianity. The Pope's comments were completely gratuitous.

His anti-capitalist remarks in Bolivia several months ago were irritating and economically illiterate, but can be explained in the context of Bolivian socioeconomic and ethnic problems, and the historic exploitation of native miners by Spanish-descended mine operators. Pope Francis' mollycoddling of the decrepit and oppressive Castro regime, and especially his avoidance when in Cuba of the representatives of the political victims of the regime, is a good deal harder to excuse than Donald Trump's sometimes inelegantly expressed but well-founded criticism of an immigration "policy" of decades that has simply turned a blind eye to the illicit, undocumented arrival in the United States of 12 million largely uneducated peasants who clog the American justice, education and welfare systems at immense cost, though they do the menial work that Americans of all pigmentations won't touch. One does not have to be an unwavering supporter of the Trump candidacy to object to Francis tossing such grenades. He puts himself in the same category of imbecility as the Vancouver aldermen who want to take Trump's name off a prominent building (whose builders paid Donald handsomely for the use of his name), and the cretins of the British parliament who want to bar him from entering the U.K.

It is distressing to see discord sewn in the camp of the tolerant Christian West at a time when militant Islam is attacking our civilization and the remaining Christian communities in the Middle East with savage ferocity. The Roman Catholic Church has been the leading source of complaints at the oppression of Christians of all faiths, in the Middle East, Russia, China, and in South Asia and parts of Africa and Australasia. Despite the indifference of the present U.S. administration, it may be reasonably inferred that Christianity's principal ultimate secular defender, as it has been since the Second World War, will be the United States, the world's greatest power, as well as the world's largest Christian population and greatest Roman Catholic population next to Brazil. No one expects the Pope to be an overly

sophisticated geostrategist, though many of them have been. But the present Pope's fraternization with the antichrist and flippant trespasses in the presidential selection process of the traditional leader of the Western countries is, unfortunately, as Donald Trump describes it.



TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP/Getty Images Republican Presidential candidate businessman Donald Trump gestures during the Republican Presidential debate in Charleston, South Carolina.

A cautionary note should be sounded because the news organization that has unctuously enflamed this issue was the British Broadcasting Corporation. The Pope said he would not presume to make a voting recommendation and after confecting doubts about Donald Trump's Christian credentials, did cover them over with the customary presumption of goodwill. He should not have touched any of it, but the BBC is incapable of handling a story about the Pope, any pope, or Donald Trump, honestly and professionally, and putting the two together creates an explosive cocktail that reduces the Beeb to raving lunacy. Next to and along with the National Health Service (which was something of a pioneer in universal health care in English-speaking countries but is not a particularly good system today), the BBC is the greatest sacred cow in Britain. It was founded and led for many years by Lord Reith, who considered himself grossly short-changed by not being drafted to the post of prime minister, and during the Second World War, habitually referred in his diary to Mr. Churchill, then rivalled only by Roosevelt as the most admired man in the world (and Reith's boss, as he was now minister of information) as "that bloody shit, Churchill." He communicated his megalomania to the corporation, as well as his affected leftishness and perhaps, anti-popish bigotry.

Last Monday the Beeb aired with immense fanfare a preposterous "documentary" which was in fact a very laboured distortion of

the lengthy correspondence between Pope St. John Paul II and his life-long academic friends, philosopher Anna Teresa Tymieniecka and psychologist Wanda Poltawska. The subject was suggestively billed as something that would “change our perceptions” of the late pope, with the clear implications, as this nauseating defamation of the honoured dead unfolded, that there was a physical romance between the pope and Ms. Tymieniecka. She translated some of the pope’s books into English. The moderator of this rubbish (Edward Stourton) generously described his prurient fabrication as “old-fashioned journalistic sleuthing.” This was the same level of self-indulgent sanctimony the BBC reverted to in transmitting to the world the insinuation that Pope Francis had called Donald Trump a heretical evil-doer.

This pope rendered a mighty service with his epochal “who am I to judge?” (about homosexuality). Answer came there none, and his qualifications to judge, or seek to influence, the U.S. Republican nominating process, are much more doubtful.

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