



Bishop William Byrne of Springfield, Massachusetts, gives the keynote address during the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington Feb. 8. (OSV News/Leslie E. Kossoff)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

February 13, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Editor's note: *This is a special publication from NCR columnist Michael Sean Winters' weekly newsletter, where he covers a wide range of topics and recommends other articles from a variety of news outlets. You can get this newsletter delivered to your inbox every Tuesday [by signing up here](#).*

There may have been scrambled eggs at [last week's National Catholic Prayer Breakfast](#), and there may have been prayer, but the event was partisan, not national, and sectarian, not Catholic.

Did no one think to ask about the appropriateness of having CatholicVote as a sponsor? The organization mined cellphone data from unsuspecting Catholics attending Mass through a [controversial tactic called "geofencing"](#) in an effort to identify potential voters. This is a far cry from setting up a voter registration table at a coffee klatch after Mass, in which no one's data is mined without their knowledge. Geofencing is intrusive and creepy.

What about the sponsorship of the Heritage Foundation, and its [Project 2025](#)? Heritage is not like the Brookings Institution or the American Enterprise Institute, venerable think tanks that lean a bit one way or the other but host scholars and policy experts with a great diversity of ideological opinion. Heritage has been weaponized into an advocacy organization.

[Related:](#) [DC Catholic prayer breakfast features Trump links, jibes against Fauci](#)

And what they advocate is frightening. Project 2025 aims to train conservatives "how to seize the gears of power effectively" from career civil servants should former President Donald Trump reclaim the presidency this year. They draft policies and assemble lists of loyal apparatchiks to move in and gut what Trump calls the "deep state." The rest of us call the deep state "experts."

Of all the fallen Catholics in the country, keynote speaker Bishop William Byrne happened upon Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of the nation's most prominent former civil servants, for criticism as a bad Catholic. Citing a BBC interview in which Fauci admitted he had fallen away from the practice of the faith, the bishop of Springfield, Massachusetts, opined that Fauci "succinctly articulates the voice of the majority of Americans who identify as Catholic but do not recognize the beauty and the power of their baptism."

Byrne is the incoming chair of the bishops' Communications Committee, so I am guessing he knew mentioning Fauci would garner headlines, [which it did](#). He surely knew that the audience of conservative Catholics in the room would not look askance at Fauci becoming a punching bag, and they didn't.

The affable, avuncular Byrne said, "I don't mean to beat up on Dr. Fauci." Yes, you did, bishop.

[According to Pew Research survey data](#), a third of all those raised Catholic have fallen away from the faith or converted to some other religion. Ten percent of the American population consists of former Catholics.

Advertisement

I disagree with Fauci's comments about the faith and the "institutional church," but one of the reasons people leave is because of priests who think it is OK to deride someone whom they have never personally pastored, and about whom they know only what they read in the newspaper, yet they feel comfortable commenting about their faith life. Political hacks and journalists can do that. Not pastors.

Such tactics as were on display at the breakfast — geofencing, plotting the overthrow of expertise in government, and publicly deriding the faith of someone you don't know — these are the hallmarks of the culture warrior sect of American Catholicism. Let the organizers rename this the Republican Culture Warrior Prayer Breakfast. Otherwise, the archbishop of Washington should deny permission for the event. As currently conceived and executed, it is more of a scandal than a breakfast, no matter how good the pancakes.

Links

[From the Associated Press](#), a look at the possibility of converting the energy sector in Puerto Rico to sustainable energy. This process should have begun after Hurricane Maria devastated the energy grid on the island, but better late than never.

[At Politico](#), Charlie Mahtesian and Steven Shepard look at the various scenarios that could unfold if President Joe Biden recognizes that his age really is the kind of issue that cannot be overcome, and drops out of the race. They acknowledge the unlikelihood of that happening, but also the necessity of thinking about a Plan B.

[At Architecture Daily](#), a preview of some of Paris' most iconic monuments, and how they are being converted into use as sporting venues for the upcoming Olympic Games.

Until next Tuesday,

Michael Sean Winters
NCR Political Columnist
[mswinters@ncronline.org](mailto:mwinters@ncronline.org)