News

Alex Nason, the Harris campaign's coordinator for Catholics and Irish-Americans, hosts a virtual organizing call for Catholics Sept. 18. (NCR screenshot)

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The Harris-Walz campaign launched its outreach to Catholics with a virtual organizing call Sept. 18, in which host Alex Nason, the campaign's coordinator for Catholics and Irish Americans, emphasized that Catholic voters are "not defined by a single partisan organization but by our values."

The call was originally scheduled for August but postponed until after the Democratic National Convention. The campaign did not return NCR's request for details about the number of attendees at the online event.

Speakers on the 45-minute call included Joe Donnelly, former ambassador to the Holy See; Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, former executive director of Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice; Anthea Butler, a University of Pennsylvania professor and MSNBC commentator; and U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, who represents the 3rd District of Connecticut.

They highlighted areas of overlap between Catholic values and the policies promoted by Vice President Kamala Harris and vice presidential nominee Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz. Harris is Baptist, while Walz is Lutheran.

Nearly every speaker on the Catholic organizing call mentioned Pope Francis.

Campbell directly addressed the issue of abortion, an issue that historically moved many Catholic voters from the Democratic Party to the GOP. This year, the Republican platform removed language supporting a federal ban on abortion.

"The fact is that our faith does not require the outlawing of abortion," said Campbell, who received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2022 from President Joe Biden. "Our faith teaches us that protecting life is what we're about."

Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, former executive director of Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, speaks during the Sept. 18 outreach to Catholics call by the Harris-Walz campaign. (NCR screenshot)

She noted that church teaching trusts individuals with a "well-formed conscience" to make moral decisions, and she quoted Francis, who wrote that while "defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate," other issues are also important.

"Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery and every form of rejection," she said, reading Francis' apostolic exhortation on "The Call to Holiness in Today's World."

Donnelly highlighted the "special friendship" and shared values between Francis and Biden, and added that Harris also shares those values.

"She brings people together, which is such a contrast to the person she's running against," Donnelly said. "Her values are, 'How do I make your life better?' 'How do I make our country stronger?' 'How can we bring people together?' "

"Those are all Catholic values," he said.

Donnelly stepped down as ambassador in July and returned to Indiana. He previously represented the state in the Senate and its 2nd district in the House.

He and other speakers on the call blasted the campaign of former President Donald Trump and his vice presidential candidate Sen. JD Vance for vilifying immigrants — most recently Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, whom they accused of stealing and eating pets.

"To decide your best campaign tactic is to pick on those who are struggling ... is about as cruel and unchristian and un-Catholic as I can think of," Donnelly said.

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Butler, professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, previously served on the Catholics for Biden coalition. As a historian of American religion, she said she is concerned about the future of democracy.

"We need to talk about Catholicism and democracy together because it's a really important focus of this election cycle," she said.

She cited threats to Catholics' religious freedom from evangelicals who believe Christians should dominate the government and culture. "I believe that Vice President Kamala Harris is the best person, along with Tim Walz, to put us in a place where democracy will stay in place," she said.

Butler criticized the "othering" of immigrants, people of color and women by the Republican Party. "That's not what the church teaches us," she said. "We need to respect human dignity in all forms. We need to respect life from conception to end of life. You don't get to pick which part of life is more important to you."

DeLauro, who has served in the House since 1991, said "the soul of the country" is at stake in this presidential election.

"It's essential that Catholic voices be present and truly represented in our public discourse," she said.

She said her values come from being raised in an Italian Catholic household, where her father attended daily Mass. It's where she learned to "love our neighbors as

ourselves."

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>
> —Rep. Rosa DeLauro
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She, like Campbell, quoted Francis, this time from his address to the U.S. Congress in 2015: "The fight against poverty and hunger must be fought constantly and on many fronts, especially in its causes."

"The fight is once more in front of us," DeLauro said, criticizing Republicans for "putting record profits over ordinary people, while claiming to be a party of Christian values."

She praised the Harris campaign's support of the Child Tax Credit (recently rejected by Senate Republicans); expansion of health care access, especially to maternal health care; and other "compassionate policymaking" for the poor.

"These policies are within our reach," she said.

The call concluded with Nason urging voters to "pitch in" for what he called "a margin-of-error race."

A "kitchen cabinet" of Catholics has been working with the Harris campaign, meeting weekly for about a month, said Christopher Hale, who is a member of the group of about 30 individuals. Among them are representatives of Catholics Vote Common Good and Catholic Democrats, as well as other activists, political strategists, elected officials, theologians and scholars.

The group is planning watch parties around the vice presidential debate, as well as Catholic-specific phone banking and door-to-door canvassing in battleground states, Hale told NCR.

Although one recent survey showed Catholics favoring Harris, many polls show Trump ahead among Catholic voters, especially white Catholics. A national poll released the day after the Catholic call showed Harris and Trump tied overall.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.