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A U.S. military plane carrying Guatemalan migrants deported from the United States sits on the tarmac at La Aurora airport in Guatemala City Jan. 27, 2025. (AP/Moises Castillo)

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President Joe Biden, as an elected official, completely disregarded church teaching on the issue of abortion, yet was described as a devout Catholic and one who regularly attended Mass and received Communion.

Vice President JD Vance, in his new White House role, has completely disregarded church teaching regarding immigration, an immediate life issue involving millions of the most vulnerable in society. Yet he repeatedly self describes as a devout Catholic and will no doubt be welcome in Catholic churches and have no difficulty receiving Communion.

It is time that Catholics stop conflating church teaching with public policy.

It serves neither to burden one with the other as if strict adherence to church law has now become a mark of good governance. Church teaching can inform public policy, and often has in the past, but the two are not equivalent, nor should they be.

This moment, with the Trump administration continuing to spread falsehoods about immigrants while apparently loading planes with [handcuffed immigrants sent off without due process](#), may provide the opportunity for bishops to make that distinction in a new way. [It may be the moment](#) to rise above the partisanship and single-issue tactic that has dominated their political engagement in recent decades.

In a 1983 lecture at Fordham University, the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin introduced what he called the "[consistent ethic of life](#)," also referred to as the "seamless garment" approach to difficult social justice questions. It was a model, had they chosen to adopt it, that would have allowed bishops to remain above partisan politics while preaching and teaching on a wide range of issues.

Had the seamless garment approach prevailed, the Catholic community [could have challenged](#) politicians on both sides of the aisle while raising the profile of concerns affecting migrants, workers, men and women of color, prisoners on death row, and those otherwise on the margins of society, in addition to the unborn.

Bernardin toward the end of his life initiated the Common Ground movement, which invited voices from different perspectives to serious dialogue. Both of his efforts failed when other prominent members of the hierarchy demeaned the approaches in favor of single-issue politics.

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Now, however, the social problems that once could be downgraded by single-issue proponents as matters of "prudential judgment" have taken center stage thanks to MAGA politics and billionaire influencers. The assaults on the most vulnerable and on democratic norms have reached such extremes that bishops and other religious leaders are compelled to speak out.

By finally taking a bold, public stand opposing the Trump administration's brutal tactics toward immigrants, the bishops may have inadvertently found a way out of the narrow partisan corner they've been trapped in for decades.

Vance may have unwittingly helped the process along. In a contentious interview on CBS' "Face the Nation," Vance met the bishops' pronouncements not with any rational counter-argument, but with a [breathtakingly vulgar and cynical accusation](#) that the bishops opposed the new immigration policies for financial reasons.

He said he thought the bishops need to "actually look in the mirror a little bit and recognize that when they receive over \$100 million to help resettle illegal immigrants, are they worried about humanitarian concerns? Or are they actually worried about their bottom line?"

Justifying Trump's approval of raiding churches, schools and other sensitive locations, Vance described himself as "heartbroken" over the bishops' concerns. "I think the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has, frankly, not been a good partner in common-sense immigration enforcement that the American people voted for," Vance said. "And I hope, as a devout Catholic, that they'll do better."

Apparently, the extent of Vance's devotion to the church as well as adherence to facts reaches its limit at Trump's latest whim.

In one fell swoop, the Catholic vice president managed to insult not only the hierarchy and Pope Francis, but agencies such as Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities on the international and national levels; diocesan- and parish-level organizations; and untold households and ordinary Catholics.

All of those components, since 1975, have worked together to provide safe harbor and personal care for wave after wave of desperate refugees and immigrants from around the globe. Yes, the operations were mostly made possible because of federal money, funds used by agents of compassion and healing, extending welcome to

victims of war and exploitation. But as the church made clear in response to Vance, the money never covered all the costs.

Further, the bishops said, those resettled were vetted by the U.S. government. They were not illegal.

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Finally, if Vance cared to listen at all to the bishops, he would have heard repeatedly that they are for common-sense immigration reform and migrants entering the country legally. They just don't care for haphazard, indiscriminate mass deportations, or ripping apart established families. They also know, and sophisticated studies back this up, that the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They [pay billions of dollars in taxes and generate more than \\$1 trillion in economic activity](#) annually to the U.S. economy. Catholic bishops are not to blame for a broken immigration system — politicians like Vance are. And Catholics are called to give aid to those victimized by it.

Aside from stumbling over basic domestic realities, Vance, by extension, dismissed Francis, who said of the mass deportation plan: "If it is true, it will be a disgrace, because it makes the poor wretches who have nothing pay the bill for the inequalities."

A consistent ethic of life approach makes more sense now than ever. Bernardin's proposal was a modern expression of the church's more than 130-year-old social justice tradition. Often referred to as the church's best kept secret, the teaching tradition, beginning with Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, has been endorsed and embellished by a host of papacies through to the Francis era.

The bishops appeared to be elevating that tradition when Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, [issued a statement](#) raising broad concerns about Trump administration plans. "Some provisions contained in the Executive Orders, such as those focused on the treatment of immigrants and refugees, foreign aid, expansion of the death penalty, and the

environment, are deeply troubling and will have negative consequences, many of which will harm the most vulnerable among us," Broglio said.

Perhaps as a sign that clarification is needed, he noted the church "is not aligned with any political party, and neither is the conference of bishops. No matter who occupies the White House or holds the majority on Capitol Hill, the Church's teachings remain unchanged."

The Trump administration's threats to basic decency and the common good are unprecedented in our politics. The challenge to bishops as teachers and examples is likewise unprecedented. Catholics don't need to be told how to vote. They need to understand the long and deep tradition that fleshes out the Gospel's insistent focus on the least of those among us.

By even Washington standards, Vance's feigned heartbroken agony is stunning beltway histrionics. It is the American people who should be heartbroken, but not because bishops and other religious leaders are raising their voices in opposition to mass deportations and calumnious depictions of immigrants. We should be heartbroken for those whose lives and families are unnecessarily in jeopardy. As Catholics, we are called in our long tradition to act on their behalf.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. [View the full series.](#)