

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

'I find it baffling and reprehensible': Catholic archbishop of Washington slams Trump's visit to John Paul II shrine

By **Sarah Pulliam Bailey** and **Michelle Boorstein**

June 2, 2020 at 9:59 p.m. UTC

President Trump triggered sharp condemnation from top religious leaders for the second time in two days on Tuesday, with Washington Archbishop Wilton Gregory slamming his visit to a D.C. shrine honoring Pope John Paul II.

On Monday, Trump's appearance in front of St. John's Episcopal Church across from the White House set off a controversy because it involved aggressively clearing peaceful protesters.

"I find it baffling and reprehensible that any Catholic facility would allow itself to be so egregiously misused and manipulated in a fashion that violates our religious principles, which call us to defend the rights of all people, even those with whom we might disagree," Gregory said in a statement as Trump and first lady Melania Trump arrived at the Saint John Paul II National Shrine in Northeast Washington.

The shrine was opened as a museum to John Paul in 2001 but nose-dived financially and was bailed out in 2011 by the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic men's religious organization that has lobbied for conservative political causes, such as opposing same-sex marriage.

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In his statement, Gregory noted the legacy of Pope John Paul II, suggesting he would not have condoned Trump's actions, including his walk to St. John's on Monday as hundreds of demonstrators nearby were protesting the death of George Floyd last week in the custody of the Minneapolis police. Once he got to the church, the president held a Bible aloft and news crews recorded the moment.

"Saint Pope John Paul II was an ardent defender of the rights and dignity of human beings. His legacy bears vivid witness to that truth," Gregory said. "He certainly would not condone the use of tear gas and other deterrents to silence, scatter or intimidate them for a photo opportunity in front of a place of worship and peace."

It's unusual for someone like Gregory to make such a stark statement about Trump specifically; Catholic bishops generally speak about issues more broadly. In a statement last week, Gregory, who was installed as the first black archbishop of Washington in 2019, said Floyd's death, "like all acts of racism, hurts all of us in the Body of Christ since we are each made in the image and likeness of God, and deserve the dignity that comes with that existence."

Trump's brief visit to the shrine appeared to serve primarily as another photo opportunity. The president and the first lady, who identifies as Roman Catholic, stood to face the media before facing the statue of John Paul II for a few minutes. Then they looked at a wreath of red and white roses that held a card saying "Mr. President."

About half a mile away, several dozen protesters held signs that read, “Black lives matter,” “Trump mocks Christ” and “God is not a prop.” Just before noon, the group knelt down for eight minutes of silence and prayer — one for each minute a police officer knelt on Floyd’s neck before he died.

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Chian Gavin, 57, of nearby Brookland, wiped her eyes while the crowd sang “Amazing Grace.”

“Eight minutes is so long,” she said. “To think that someone would be in pain, would be suffering in that position for that long.”

Chanon Bah, 31, said she’s tried to explain the demonstrations to her 3-year-old son Cairo. Watching television images of riot police advancing on unarmed protesters has confused him, she said. “Mommy, who’s the bad guy?” he asked.

“I tried to explain that sometimes, the police are the good guys, but sometimes they’re not,” Bah said. “We talk a lot about feelings. That maybe those people out there are not mad. Maybe they’re sad. Or scared.”

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Michelle Dixon, 38, said she was moved to come out to stand against what she saw as Trump's disingenuous show of faith. Dixon, a congregant at All Souls Church, said God is "sacred, and really the embodiment of unconditional love."

"How can you stand there and hold up a Bible and say you believe in this unconditional love that is God when you are sowing fear and hatred and shooting peaceful protesters just down the street?" she said. "It's unforgivable."

Trump's appearances in front of St. John's and at the shrine were seen as attempts to appeal to his conservative evangelical and Catholic voting base. Both appearances were met with fierce condemnation by religious progressives — and also concern from some religious conservatives.

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"The Bible is a book we should hold only with fear and trembling, given to us that in it we might find eternal life," J.D. Greear, president of the Southern Baptist Convention said in a statement to the Washington Post. "Our only agenda should be to advance God's kingdom, proclaim his gospel, or find rest for our souls."

Russell Moore, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Religious Liberty and Ethics Convention, said in a statement that he was "brokenhearted and alarmed."

"For me, the Bible is the Word of the living God, and should be treated with reverence and awe," he said, adding that Americans should listen to what the Bible says about the preciousness of human life, the sins of racism and injustice and the need for safety and calm and justice in the civil arena.

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"The murder of African-American citizens, who bear the image of God, is morally wrong," Moore said. "Violence against others and destruction of others' property is morally wrong. Pelting people with rubber bullets and spraying them with tear gas for peacefully protesting is morally wrong."

The Right Rev. Mariann Budde, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, excoriated Trump for standing in front of the historic church Monday — its windows boarded up with plywood — while holding the Bible aloft. “Everything he has said and done is to inflame violence,” she said of the president. “We need moral leadership, and he’s done everything to divide us.”

Budde and other religious progressives have denounced Trump in the past, on multiple issues. from immigration to fiscal policy to LGBTQ rights. But on Tuesday there was also criticism by others who are not vocal opponents of the president.

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“There is no right to riot,” said Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) in a statement. “But there is a fundamental—a Constitutional—right to protest, and I’m against clearing out a peaceful protest for a photo op that treats the Word of God as a political prop.”

Ed Stetzer wrote on his Christianity Today magazine blog that the president’s photo op was “jarring and awkward. It did not play well, even with many of the president’s supporters.”

“America is burning. We need a call to justice that sees each and every person as image bearers of their Creator—as the Bible teaches,” he wrote. “But, we did not need that photo op.”

Also on Tuesday, several pastors stood on the steps of St. John's, calling for an end to police brutality.

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Pastors on the steps of [#StJohnsChurch](#) calling for end to police brutality, solidarity with [#DCProtests](#). "God is always on the side of the oppressed. Mr. President, I promise your hands are too small to box with God."



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John Paul II is especially remembered by conservative Catholics for his strong anti-Communist and antiabortion stances. In a statement Tuesday, the shrine said that the White House originally scheduled the visit as an event at which the president would sign an executive order on international religious freedom.

Later Tuesday, the president did sign an executive order that, among other moves, stated that \$50 million in USAID's budget should be allocated for advancing international religious freedom.

"St. John Paul II was a tireless advocate of religious liberty throughout his pontificate," said the statement from the shrine, which did not address Floyd's death or the related protests.

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"International religious freedom receives widespread bipartisan support, including unanimous passage of legislation in defense of persecuted Christians and religious minorities around the world," the statement said. "The shrine welcomes all people to come and pray and learn about the legacy of St. John Paul II."

John Paul's movement for religious freedom, including in his native Eastern Europe from communism, is considered one of his key legacies. Tuesday is the 41st anniversary of his first papal visit to Poland.

The shrine, according to its website, "is a place of pilgrimage housing two first-class relics of St. John Paul II. Here, through liturgy and prayer, art, and cultural and religious formation, visitors can enter into its patron's deep love for God and for man."

Stephen Schneck, former head of Catholic outreach for then-President Barack Obama and current executive director of the Franciscan Action Network, said he was "disgusted that the Knights would allow the Shrine to St. John Paul II to be used for what is transparently a Trump reelection campaign event."

"Pope St. John Paul II was an ardent foe of racism. In his last visit to the United States the saint begged our nation to eradicate racism from its heart. One cannot imagine a worse insult to John Paul II's memory than to hold a Trump re-election event at the saint's shrine," he told The Post in a statement.

Messages to the Knights of Columbus were not immediately returned Tuesday morning. Trump's attorney, Pat Cipollone, was a top lawyer with the organization, holding the title "supreme advocate."

Trump has signed several orders related to religious freedom. Charles Haynes, senior fellow for religious freedom at the Freedom Forum, said the orders have been primarily symbolic, but have the potential to change how federal departments enforce existing law.

Early in his administration, Trump promised to abolish the Johnson Amendment, which prohibits clergy from endorsing politicians from the pulpit. But it would take an act of Congress to change the amendment. Instead, Trump issued an executive order on how his administration would enforce the amendment. In another case, he signed a rule offering protections for health-care workers who declined services that violate their religious beliefs, a move that concerned LGBTQ advocacy groups.

"It reiterates the law in some cases," Hayes said of the orders. "There already are religious liberty protections, but he wants to underscore we're upholding them or we're implementing them."

Marissa J. Lang contributed to this report.

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