

People Who Only Build Walls Is Not Christian; Trump Responds To Pope's Criticism; Town Hall Tonight; Campaign Fight Gets Ugly In South Carolina; Trump Responds to Pope. Aired 1-1:30p ET

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Highlight: Donald Trump responds to the pope's criticism. Pope Francis wading into U.S. presidential politics, suggesting that Donald Trump's immigration plans are not those of a Christian. Perspective from Pastor Mark Burns on the pope's statement.

Body

WOLF BLITZER, CNN HOST: Hello, I'm Wolf Blitzer. It's 1:00 p.m. here in Washington, 7:00 p.m. in Rome, 8:00 p.m. in Ankara, Turkey. Wherever you're watching from around the world, thanks very much for joining us.

We begin with breaking news involving two very emotional, sometimes volatile issues, politics and religion. Pope Francis wading into U.S. presidential politics, suggesting that Donald Trump's immigration plans are not those of a Christian. The pope was taking questions from reporters on a flight to Rome after his visit to the U.S.-Mexican border. He responded to Trump's plan to build a wall along that border and Trump's accusation of Mexico using him as a political pawn. Listen to this.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

POPE FRANCIS (translator): Thank god, he said I was a politician, because Aristotle defined the human person animal politicus. At least I'm a human person. As to whether I'm a pawn, well, maybe. I don't know. I'll leave that up to your Dutchmen and that of the people. And then, a person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be located, and not building bridges, is not a Christian. This is not in the gospel.

As far as what you said about whether I would advise to vote or not vote, I am not going to get involved in that. I say only that this man is not a Christian, if he has said things like that.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: Our Correspondent Rosa Flores was on that flight where the pope made those comments. She's joining us now from Rome. Rosa, help us get some context. What exactly was the question the pope was asked? Give us the full context of this exchange.

ROSA FLORES, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Wolf, you're absolutely right. Context is very important, in this case. Here's how this question was worded. It was worded the following. Pope Francis, you've been in Mexico, speaking very eloquently about immigration.

But just across the border, there is a fight for the White House, and one of the front-runners is saying that he wants to build a wall, dividing the United States and Mexico. And he also wants to deport 11 million undocumented back

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to Mexico. And some are even saying that you're a pawn of the Mexican government for coming at this particular time.

And so, Pope Francis responded by saying, you know, I can't tell someone what to do when it comes to voting in the United States because that's not the role of the pope. But I will tell you that when someone speaks about building walls, rather than bridges, that's not Christian. And he did mention that twice, these questions and answers were all in Italian, Wolf.

And I should mention this. Pope Francis did not mention Donald Trump's name. Donald Trump's name was in the question that was asked to the pope.

BLITZER: Yes, and the pope said -- as we just heard, Rosa, the pope said, I say only that this man is not Christian, if he has said things like that. And then, he added, we must see if he said things in that way and, in this, I give the benefit of the doubt. So, he was suggesting that if, in fact, Trump had said these things about building a wall, which, of course, he has, as all of our viewers know, that that would not be Christian. Those are pretty strong words, irrespective of the little caveat there at the end.

FLORES: Definitely very strong words, Wolf. In fact, a question was posed to the Vatican spokesperson the day before this press conference. And -- about Donald Trump and about his comments to Fox News. And the spokesperson, Father Lombardi, said, you know, Pope Francis is aware that there is a -- an election in the United States. He knows that there is a very colorful character that is part of this election, that is very expressive in the way that he speaks using those particular words, Wolf. Not saying the name, Donald Trump. But just, you know, alluding to the fact that Pope Francis is aware of this election but never naming Donald Trump by name.

BLITZER: It didn't take, Rosa, Donald Trump very long to respond to the pope's comments. Just a little while ago at a campaign stop in South Carolina, he said this.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

DONALD TRUMP (R), PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: If and when the Vatican is attacked by ISIS, which as everyone knows is ISIS' ultimate trophy, I can promise you that the pope would have only wished and prayed that Donald Trump would have been president. Because -- it's true. It's true. Because this would not have happened. ISIS would have been eradicated, unlike what is happening now with our all-talk, no-action politicians. That's what's happening now.

[13:05:13] The Mexican government and its leadership has made many disparaging remarks about me to the pope, because they want to continue to rip off the United States, both on trade and at the border. That's what they're doing. They're ripping us off. And they understand that I am totally wise to them, and if I'm president, we'll stop it immediately, OK? He doesn't see how Mexican leadership and he doesn't understand it. He doesn't see how Mexican leadership is outsmarting our president, and Obama and our leadership has no clue as to the negotiation or anything else.

In other words, we are being so badly out-negotiated by Mexico. Mexico knows if I win, those days are gone. The pope is being told that Donald Trump is not a nice person, OK? Donald Trump is a very nice person. And I'm a very -- I am a very nice person. And I'm a very good Christian. For a religious leader to question a person's faith is disgraceful. I'm proud to be a Christian. And, as president, I will not allow Christianity to be consistently attacked and weakened, unlike what is happening now with our current president. OK? Believe me.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: A very strong response from Donald Trump, as you can see, to what the pope had said aboard that flight from Mexico back to Rome.

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Let's get some perspective on all of this from Mark Burns. He's a Donald Trump supporter. He's also pastor of Harvest Praise and Worship Center in Easley, South Carolina. Pastor, thanks very much for joining us. So, what's your reaction to this exchange between the pope and Donald Trump?

MARK BURNS, PASTOR, HARVEST PRAISE AND WORSHIP CENTER: Well, you know, I want to piggyback on what Mr. Trump said. I really think it's sad for the Mexican government to really use the holy father as a pawn. Again, the pope only receiving one part of a conversation of the Mexican government is consistently using propaganda, such as bringing in the holy father himself to outmaneuver, outrank -- outmaneuver the United States' government and the leadership that we currently have.

I mean, the bible, throughout the scriptures, lists over and over again the building of walls. I'm a little perplexed for the -- for the pope to say one who is building walls would be unchristian when, in reality, the Vatican itself is 100 percent covered around a wall. The book of Nehemiah, in Chapter two, verse 17, makes it very clear that -- Nehemiah said, see the bad situation you're in, come and let us build a wall. In Nehemiah, Chapter six, verse number 16, the bible of bible says that when the enemies heard that a wall was being built, they were afraid for that the work was done by the Lord.

So, for me to hear the pope declare that building a wall is -- anyone who builds walls is not a Christian, I'm very perplexed and a little bit confused. Again, remind you, the Vatican, itself, is 100 percent surrounded around a wall. And I really want to be clear, because I don't want this to become a Trump attack against Catholics or the holy father or the pope. Again, we recognize who the pope is. And I think the pope is really being used as a pawn by the Mexican government to, once again, outwit the United States' government and our current leadership. Mr. Trump --

BLITZER: All right.

BURNS: -- has made it clear that we, as Christians, will have a friend in the White House. And, again, I'm just perplexed and a little bit confused -- BLITZER: All right.

BURNS: -- why the pope --

BLITZER: Well, let me be --

BURNS: -- would make such statements.

BLITZER: I just want to be precise what the pope said and I'll read his words to you, precisely, pastor. He said, a person who thinks only --

BURNS: Sure.

BLITZER: -- about building walls, wherever they may be, and not of building bridges, is not Christian. So, those were his exact words.

BURNS: Sure. And I'm going to say this. I think the United States government has been and will continue to be a safe haven for those who are less fortunate. I really believe it is important that we continue to use the might of the United States government to help those who are in trouble, to help and protect those who are being destroyed and killed. But there is a way to do it and also still protect the citizens of the United States of America. And that's exactly what Mr. Trump is proposing.

It is -- it is -- it is Christ-like, I believe, to first make sure that those whom you are assigned to protect, you take care first. My children, my wife, Tamara Burns, and my six beautiful children. My job, as the father, is to first protect my children before I begin to protect anyone else. Even when a plane is going down in a crisis, the stewardesses will tell you, please put the oxygen mask on your face first before you put the oxygen mask on anyone else.

[13:10:04] And so, it is important, I believe, that we first make sure that our borders are secure, then position ourselves to be a blessing to everyone else in the world. I think the United States and Mr. Trump will continue to

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strive to **build bridges** for those who are less fortunate. So, let's make sure we don't confuse what the pope said and Mr. Trump's intentions on being a unifier and **not** a divider.

BLITZER: As you know, the pope is the spiritual leader to about 1.2 billion Catholics worldwide. Does Donald Trump risk alienating Catholics, specifically in South Carolina where you are, when he criticizes the pontiff as being political?

BURNS: Well, you know, I think, again -- I think we really need to focus on the Mexican government utilizing the pope as a pawn. We can't be foolish or to believe that the pope does **not** carry such weight as he does because he is, in fact, the pope. He is, in fact, the holy father and recognized by over a billion Catholic -- over a billion Catholic believers as the point of contact to who we believe the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. The internally representation of our god, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob here on earth.

And so, we cannot be fooled and perplexed to think that the pope does **not** carry a political weight wherever he goes and whatever he says. And so, we want to make sure that what Mr. Trump said is **not** taken out of context. And what Mr. Trump said is **not** to alienate the Catholic body and the holy father himself.

But to criticize the Mexican government for utilizing the pope himself or just giving one side of the speech. I'm sure the Mexican government didn't tell you about the countless amount of drugs that are coming through our border from the Mexican country -- from Mexico. I'm sure they don't tell you about the countless amount of rapes and the countless amount of murders that take place from illegal immigrants that are using the border of Mexico to enter into the United States illegally. I'm sure they don't discuss those conversations with the pope. It's all about **building** a **wall** and segregating and **not** unifying it. That's **not** the case at all.

I do want to thank the pope, though, for recognizing the GOP front- runner, because, again, millions of Americans are doing just that, supporting Donald Trump and getting behind him. Evangelicals and Christians alike are getting behind a person who will actually do what he said he's going to do.

BLITZER: He's doing well among evangelical Republican primary voters, certainly, according to the polls, in South Carolina where you are. Pastor, thanks very much for joining us.

BURNS: God bless you. Thank you, Wolf.

BLITZER: Thank you. Pastor Mark Burns joining us.

The important programming note for our viewers, tune in tonight to see three of the GOP presidential candidates make their pitch directly to South Carolina voters. John Kasich, Jeb Bush and Donald Trump. They will appear in a CNN town hall moderated by Anderson Cooper. Our coverage begins at 8:00 p.m. Eastern right here on CNN.

Still ahead, the latest controversy about the pope and Donald Trump will surely on the minds of voters in South Carolina, especially evangelicals. How could that impact tonight's town hall with these three Republican candidates?

And Ted Cruz versus Marco Rubio. The camp fight is getting ugly before Saturday's primary. Why the battle to overtake Donald Trump may only be hurting themselves.

[13:13:44]

[13:17:31] BLITZER: Donald Trump takes the stage, takes questions tonight from South Carolina voters in the second night of our CNN town hall. The pope's comments suggesting Trump is **not** necessarily a Christian sure to be part of the conversation. The pope says someone who **builds walls** instead of **bridges**, the pope's words, is **not** Christian. Trump responded to the pope's remarks at a campaign stop last hour.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

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DONALD TRUMP (R), PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: If and when the Vatican is attacked by ISIS, which as everyone knows is ISIS' ultimate trophy, I can promise you that the pope would have only wished and prayed that Donald Trump would have been president, because -- it's true. It's true. Because this would not have happened. ISIS would have been eradicated, unlike what is happening now, with our all-talk, no-action politicians. That's what's happening now.

The pope isn't being told that. The pope is being told that Donald Trump is not a nice person. OK. Donald Trump is a very nice person. And I'm a very -- I am a very nice person. And I'm a very good Christian. For a religious leader to question a person's faith is disgraceful. I'm proud to be a Christian. And as president, I will not allow Christianity to be consistently attacked and weakened, unlike what is happening now with our current president.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: We're also watching for Republican presidential candidate and a devout catholic himself, Jeb Bush, to address the media about the Trump-pope development, the exchange that has occurred today. As soon as that happens, we'll go there live. You're looking at live pictures outside his bus there in Columbia, South Carolina.

In the meantime, let's bring in our CNN Politics executive editor, Mark Preston, and our chief political analyst, Gloria Borger.

Gloria, what's your take on this -- the pope's comments, the Donald Trump response? How's it likely to play into tonight's town hall?

GLORIA BORGER, CNN CHIEF POLITICAL ANALYST: Well, first of all, Wolf, just when you thought that this race couldn't get any crazier, here we have Donald Trump and the pope in an argument over building a wall and immigration. The question is whether Donald Trump calling the pope disgraceful is going to have any impact on his voters, his hard-core supporters, which include evangelical voters, is really unanswerable at this point. The pope is popular in this country. He's not universally popular. He's viewed as a more liberal pope.

[13:20:06] But I -- it's hard to say whether Donald Trump getting into a fight with the pope is going to have impact among his core 35, 30 to 35 percent of supporters. It's -- what is clear is that his opponents, like Jeb Bush, who, as you point out, is getting ready to have a session with reporters about this, that his opponents will clearly, clearly take on Donald Trump on this.

BLITZER: They -- I'm sure he will.

BORGER: Yes.

BLITZER: And, Mark, as you know, as all of our viewers know, building this wall along the U.S./Mexico border, that's been a cornerstone of Donald Trump's immigration policies from day one, the day he announced he was running for the Republican nomination. I assume that just because he's getting criticized now by the pope, he's not going to back away from that at all.

MARK PRESTON, CNN POLITICS EXECUTIVE EDITOR: No, it only emboldens him. In many ways, as you said, as a cornerstone, it really is the base of his whole campaign. When he announced that he was running in midsummer, he talked about immigration and -- illegal immigration, and talks about how he's the one who brought it to the forefront and nobody else would talk about it.

Now, just talk about the scene from yesterday, where you have the pope on the border, literally, you know, just right across the way, you know, from the U.S. in Mexico line, talking about how there needs to be more compassion and humanity about this. But to Gloria's point, you know, I think we've come to the point right now, Wolf, that we can't really come up with a prediction about how this is really going to play out because every time Donald Trump has said something that's been very controversial, that we thought would kill his candidacy, it only solidifies his support - with his supporters. So we'll see how this plays out over the next couple days. But I don't really know if this does affect Donald Trump.

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BORGER: You know, I was at a Rubio rally this morning and I went out into the crowd and spoke with a whole bunch of voters, and there were a bunch I spoke to who used to be Trump supporters and who were a little bit turned off recently by his performances and they were really giving Rubio a serious look. So, you know, that's just completely anecdotal, Wolf. He's clearly ahead by a large amount in this state. And there's a fight for second place that's playing out between Cruz and Rubio. So it's just kind of -- it's just kind of hard to say right now. I think this is so fluid, you don't really know.

PRESTON: You don't really know.

BLITZER: That's a good point. Guys, stand by because we're waiting to hear from Jeb Bush. He converted to Catholicism back in the mid '90s. He's getting ready to spoke to react to what Donald Trump and the pope have been saying today. There you see a live picture just outside his bus in Columbia, South Carolina. Once he gets to the microphones, we'll hear what he has to say.

Meantime, the latest CNN/ORC poll shows Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, they're in a neck and neck battle in Nevada, so both will need more than just luck on Saturday. In the meantime, we'll have that story coming up and I think Jeb Bush is speaking right now.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: (INAUDIBLE) that President Trump were in office. What do you think about that?

JEB BUSH (R), PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: Well, first of all, if you listen to his plans on ISIS, it's gone from, we don't have a dog in the fight, to let Russia deal with ISIS, which they have no interest in doing, let ISIS take out Assad and then we're going to bomb the bleep out of ISIS.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Well, governor, these --

BUSH: This is not the policy.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: (INAUDIBLE) --

BUSH: That's not a policy. So --

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Let's -- but let's just talk about --

BUSH: Let's talk about him being president.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: (INAUDIBLE) Trump's going at it with the pope? As a devout Catholic, what do you think about it?

BUSH: I think the pope said apparently that he might not be Christian. I think his Christianity is between him and his creator. I don't think we need to discuss that.

As it relates to his policies relating to ISIS, he's not the right guy to be commander in chief. The Swiss Army Guards probably are taking pretty good care of the pope. So I'm not worried about it.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Do you think the pope was wrong to question his Christianity?

BUSH: I don't question anybody's Christianity, because I honestly believe that that's a relationship that you have with your creator. And it only -- it only enables bad behavior when you -- when someone from outside our country talks about Donald Trump.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Governor, do you agree with his statement, then? What Pope Francis said was, the person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. Do you agree with that statement (ph)?

BUSH: I don't know what that means. That's -- that's a --

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UNIDENTIFIED MALE: You don't support a wall.

BUSH: I -- I support walls and fencing where it's appropriate for sure. I also believe that we ought to have other parts of this, which is forward leaning (ph) the -- the border patrol, using their own technology, using GPS technology. Across the board, we ought to have a strategy to protect our border. And that is clear. But that is not -- that's not an unchristian thing to do, to make -- to make sure that people don't come across our border illegally. That's a just thing to do.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Thank you guys. We've got to head out.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: But is presidential -- is it presidential to go back and forth as a presidential candidate (INAUDIBLE) Pope Francis?

[13:25:03] BUSH: I'd say away from that, in my own personal opinion, being someone who is the head of my church and I would (INAUDIBLE). He's my spiritual leader. And as we have said from other areas, whether it's global warming or other things, I think it's OK, as a catholic, to give my guidance as a catholic from the pope, but certainly not the economic policy or departmental policy. I respect the pope. His voice will be heard. But dealing with ISIS, we need someone who has a steady hand and a strategy. I'm the only guy that laid out a strategy prior to the attacks. And I'm going to stick with that being the important thing.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Hey, Jeb, (INAUDIBLE) this way.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: (INAUDIBLE) what they say are calls and reports that you're on (INAUDIBLE) running out of money (ph). Can you assure your supporters of this (INAUDIBLE)?

BUSH: Yes, I can.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Thanks, guys.

BLITZER: All right, there's Jeb Bush, the Republican presidential candidate. He's a convert to Catholicism back in the mid 1990s, he converted to Catholicism, reacting to this latest exchange between the pope and Donald Trump.

Mark Preston and Gloria Borger are still with us.

Gloria, I don't know if you could hear what he was saying a lot better than I could. I was having trouble understanding what he was saying. The audio wasn't that great. But if you could summarize briefly what we just heard, I think that would be good for our viewers.

BORGER: Yes, it's a -- it's a little bit difficult. Mark and I were trying to parse it. It seems to me that he was low-keying his response to this, to a great degree, talking about the spiritual guidance he gets from the pope, but not his political guidance or economic guidance from the pope. And that he believes, you know -- he doesn't judge other people's Christianity. So I think Bush was given an opportunity to kind of come down really hard on Donald Trump on this. And I don't think he did. I don't think he did.

PRESTON: I agree. You know, Wolf, you know what's interesting about this is that Jeb Bush scheduled this news conference right after Donald Trump had made these remarks. And in many ways we thought that Jeb Bush would come out swinging hard on Donald Trump. And, really, that's kind of been, at least what some people think, has been a criticism of his campaign is that he hasn't come out swinging. He's not a political animal. He's a policy wonk. So I think he has struggled with that, like when it gets down to the bare knuckle fighting. It doesn't mean that he's not qualified to be president, doesn't mean that, you know, he wouldn't be a good president. But, on the campaign trail, he's not a bare knuckle fighter with Donald Trump and it's something he's struggled with. Although I have to say, you know, over the past few days, he seems to have got his mojo back, you know, a word that we've been using for Marco Rubio on this. But I don't know if we saw it right then.

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BORGER: Well, it's interesting because he's the one who has been out there saying, I'm the only guy taking on Donald Trump. He's called him a jerk and other assorted names during the campaign, wondering where all his colleagues were on taking on Trump. Now Cruz is taking on Trump as well. And when given the opportunity today, he wasn't as forceful as I -- as I thought he might have been on this. And that's obviously because the pope, I think, is a bit controversial among Republicans because he's -- he's a -- considered a liberal pope.

PRESTON: Right.

BLITZER: Yes, you've got -- you've got to take a look at this exchange, what the pope said about Donald Trump. And just to remind our viewers, he -- the words were very specific. He said, "I say only that this man is not Christian if he has said things like that," referring to building these walls. "We must see if he said things in that way, and in this I give the benefit of the doubt." That's what the pope said aboard the flight from Mexico to Rome.

And then Donald Trump's response, a lengthy statement. You saw him reading it at that rally just a little while ago. But he did say specifically for a religious leader to question a person's faith is disgraceful. Strong words from Donald Trump.

All right, guys --

BORGER: You know, by the way --

BLITZER: Go ahead. Go ahead, quickly.

BORGER: Wolf, building a wall is a very popular position in the Republican Party. So the pope would be -- if he were in politics here, he'd be on the wrong side of that issue if he were running in a Republican primary in South Carolina.

BLITZER: All right, guys, stand by because we're going to continue to watch what's going on. There's other news we're following, as well.

The Democratic contest in Nevada, that's coming up this Saturday. It's neck and neck right now between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton. We'll update you on what's going on there when we come back.

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