

How the ‘Principles of Our Faith [Are] Being Manifest Under the President’s Watch

White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney declared at the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast on Tuesday (April 23) that faith drives the Trump administration’s policy proposals, arguing that “the principles of our faith (are) being manifest” under the president’s watch.

Also in attendance at the breakfast – a largely conservative religious gathering that meets annually in Washington – were two deputy assistants to President Trump, United States Ambassador for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback and Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey.

Mulvaney, who is Catholic, opened his talk with an anecdote about speaking several years ago at a prayer breakfast in his home state of South Carolina at the invitation of then-Sen. Jim DeMint. Mulvaney explained that as a novice to prayer breakfasts, he inadvertently chose to read a passage from the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus encourages believers to pray in private, not in public. He said a priest later interpreted the passage for him, arguing it does not bar public prayer but is part of Jesus’ call to do “the opposite of what is popular.”

The Trump administration’s policy agenda, Mulvaney suggested, constitutes just that sort of unpopular but faithful action.

“The president has allowed us, Christians of all denominations, folks from all different faiths ... to be very vocal about their faith, and to practice their faith, and to take their faith and work it into our policies,” he said.

As examples, Mulvaney noted Trump’s efforts to return pastor

Andrew Brunson from captivity in Turkey and recounted an experience of the president telling other world leaders in meetings that they are “not doing enough to take care of the Christians in (their) country.”

Mulvaney also said the president personally added more discussion of abortion to this year’s State of the Union address as a direct response to reports of Gov. Ralph Northam voicing support for a bill that would loosen restrictions on late-term abortions in Virginia.

“I’m comfortable as a Catholic – even though I work for a gentleman who is not Roman Catholic – that the principles of our faith are alive and well, and well-respected in this administration, and are driving many of our policies,” he said. “That’s something I’m extraordinarily proud to be a part of.”

Trump has publicly feuded with Pope Francis, who has criticized the president’s border wall proposal and suggested in 2016 that the business mogul-turned-politician is “not Christian” because of his views on immigration.

The chief of staff closed his talk by leading the assembly in a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer.

The breakfast is modeled after the National Prayer Breakfast, an older gathering with a distinctly more Protestant flair, and both draw a largely conservative crowd. It is sponsored by groups such as the Catholic Association as well as the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and the Institute on Religion and Democracy. Speakers are often prominent Republicans, including Vice President Mike Pence, then-House Speaker Paul Ryan, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and President George W. Bush.

This year abortion was a focus. Key speakers included Sister Bethany Madonna of the Sisters of Life, whose work focuses on abortion-related issues; Bishop Thomas Olmsted of the Diocese

of Phoenix; and Curtis Martin, founder and CEO of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students.

Both Madonna and Olmsted characterized the resistance to faith-based opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage as “persecution.”

“When you surrender to (Jesus), you can be strong with his strength, and you will be able to endure the insults that come with defending every human life,” Madonna said. She added later: “You will be able to withstand the persecution that comes from holding to the truth about marriage and the family.”

The program featured an appearance by Abby Johnson, the basis for the 2019 film “Unplanned,” in which actress Ashley Bratcher portrays Johnson’s real-life experience as a Planned Parenthood official who became an anti-abortion activist. The film has become a cause celebre among conservative Christians, who believe its release publicity was thwarted by Hollywood.

The biggest celebrities at the breakfast, however, appeared to be the parents of Nick Sandmann, the Covington Catholic High School student from Kentucky who made national headlines in January after video of an encounter between him and Nathan Phillips, a Native American elder, at the March for Life went viral on social media. After prayer breakfast board member William Saunders introduced the couple as deserving “special recognition” and said their son had been “verbally assaulted” at the protest and attacked by the media, the crowd rose and gave them a standing ovation.

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