

5 lessons from the pope in how to respond to bullying.

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Analysis: Pope Leo XIV has shown precisely how to non-violently defeat a bully with virtues like courage, humility, integrity, honesty and selflessness

While the Pope vs president has a certain WrestleMania feel to it, it is not the 6'3" Donald Trump who seems powerful in his verbal attacks, but a 5'7" "very weak" Leo XIV emphasising nonviolence, solidarity with war victims and a certain fearlessness. Most of us have followed the narrative, from a US official's veiled threatening comment to the Papal Nuncio, to Trump chastising the pontiff for being "too weak on crime" and believing Leo is only pope because of the president, to JD Vance lecturing Pope Leo that he should be more careful when discussing theology. Indeed, do any of us - Christian, non-Christian, and/or Trump supporters - want to ever see again the image of Trump as Jesus (or a Red Cross doctor with a Christ complex)? I know I don't.

So, who's the bully here? As a theologian committed to interfaith, liberation and feminist theologies, I often find popes can be (rightfully) placed on the side of the bullies, whether in silencing women who seek to be priests, for example, or chastising pluralist Catholics who hope to push the Church beyond the inclusivity of *Nostra Aetate* (1965). Yet in the case of these two white, educated, powerful US-born men, how each display, use and share their power is quite instructive. It's also noteworthy to look at the shameful history, especially during the Cold War, of US active interference against Catholic social justice and liberation theology groups working for the poor and marginalised but deemed to be threats against US democracy. For example, prominent martyrdoms in El Salvador alone include Archbishop Oscar Romero, Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría (along with his five Jesuit colleagues, their housekeeper and her daughter), lay volunteer Jean Donovan, Sister Ita Ford, Sister Maura Clarke, and Sister Dorothy Kazel, among others. These were heroic and Christ-like victims killed either with US support or by US-trained killers. No-one is saying the CIA now has a bounty on Leo, but Christian fidelity is rooted in Jesus' advocating against the warlike and powerful, speaking out for the oppressed and

practicing egalitarian table fellowship. This is even if such a path leads to conflict with those vested in maintaining their sense of power.

As Trump, Vance, and their supporters defend Trump's verbal attacks on the Pope (or try to distance themselves carefully), here are some notable moral lessons to draw from Pope Leo's responses.

'No fear': maintain courage and conviction.

Leo has insisted he has 'no fear' of speaking out against the Trump administration, showing a brave example for world leaders. It is also one for those of us privileged with safety and stability, let alone individuals who fear reprisals from speaking out at work, in social circles or because of immigration status or other vulnerabilities.

Respond with a consistent message of humility.

While Trump's method and style is a consistent lack of consistency (and hubris), Leo never directly addresses Trump's allegations and refuses any similar slandering. Instead, he focuses on the harm caused through wars (including the US-Israeli war in Iran) and the Trump administration's policies against the poor, migrants, and sick. He promotes what I call a spunky humility: being aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, the value of all of us and the need for one another.

Practice active non-violence.

Active non-violence is not lethargic, silent, and passive—a so-called helpless turning of the cheek—but upholds the dignity of all life, including that of the perpetrators, while resisting violence through peaceful means. Knowing Trump is vulnerable to polls and political pressure from his base, Leo prophetically empowers US Catholic voters to contact their public representatives and vocalise their disagreement to them.

Use your platform for a greater good.

While Trump seeks to justify an unpopular and unjust war in Iran, Leo advocates for a universal peace and justice that maintains God's love for all of creation. Speaking this truth to power can have consequences but Leo has become a needed counter-voice

sparking deeper dialogue and truth-seeking. Sadly, instead of welcoming critique and conversation, the Trump administration seeks unquestioning obedience or silence.

Be selfless.

Trump thrives on attention and being right and smart. He belittles opponents with silly names and snide remarks, depersonalising them in the process. Though Leo rarely calls Trump by name, it is not to dehumanise Trump, but rather a decision not to feed the brand and name that seek to constantly acquire and own.

As is evident in the pope's own focus, the lives of the bombed and the trampled are what's really at stake. We instead see Leo's selflessness, which partnered with the courage above, elevates one's value while keeping the focus on those who most need to be heard and seen: the victims of these wars and those disproportionately harmed by unjust laws and policies. While Trump's tactics resemble his own roles in various WrestleMania events, Leo has shown precisely how to defeat a bully non-violently through virtues like courage, humility, integrity, honesty, and selflessness. Of course, the hope is not simply to nudge and inspire those Catholic Trump supporters who are uncomfortable with Trump's attacks on the pope to (finally) speak out. It's a step but this again is not about the pope's honour. As is evident in his own focus, the lives of the bombed and the trampled, the evicted and slain, are what's really at stake.

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