

In TV interview, Steve Bannon slams church, bishops over immigration

WASHINGTON — In an interview set to air Sept. 10 on the CBS TV program “60 Minutes,” former White House strategist Steve Bannon criticized the Catholic Church and U.S. bishops for their views on immigration, saying “they need illegal aliens to fill the pews.”

In the interview Bannon, a Catholic, told newsman Charlie Rose that the bishops have “an economic interest in illegal immigration.” He also criticized his former boss, President Donald Trump, for taking a stepback hours after ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, when the president said on Twitter that he might revisit the decision in six months.

“Trust me, the guys in the far right, the guys on the conservative side are not happy with this,” Bannon said.

Catholic officials, including a representative of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and New York Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, disputed the claim.

CBS released advance clips of the interview Sept. 7.

The interview marks the first time since leaving the Trump administration that Bannon, who founded the website Breitbart News, has spoken out. Since leaving the administration, he has returned to Breitbart.

Citing the Gospel call to welcome the stranger and other church teachings, the U.S. bishops have urged for comprehensive immigration reform and for the protection of youth under the DACA program.

Bannon said the U.S bishops have been “terrible” about handling immigration because they can’t “come to grips with the problems in the church. They need illegal aliens. They need illegal aliens to fill the churches. That’s — it’s obvious on the face

of it.”

Bannon said immigration issues are not part of church doctrine and the bishops need to understand that “this is about the sovereignty of a nation.”

“And in that regard,” he added, “they’re just another guy with an opinion.”

In a Sept. 7 statement responding to Bannon’s interview, James Rogers, chief communications officer for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said it is “preposterous to claim that justice for immigrants isn’t central to Catholic teaching,” noting that the mandate comes directly from the words of Jesus, who spoke of feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger.

“Immigrants and refugees are precisely the strangers we must welcome,” he added, saying: “This isn’t Catholic partisanship. The Bible is clear: Welcoming immigrants is indispensable to our faith.”

Rogers also noted that caring for the “Dreamers,” or DACA recipients, is a response to commands in both the Old and New Testaments.

He said the bishops’ views on life issues, marriage, health and immigration reform are “rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ rather than the convenient political trends of the day.”

Rogers stressed that for anyone to suggest that the bishops’ recent statements on immigrants are for “financial gain is outrageous and insulting.”

New York Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan offered similar reaction in a Sept. 7 interview on the Jennifer Fulwiler Show, on The Catholic Channel, on SiriusXM satellite radio.

The cardinal said he had seen a transcript of the Bannon interview on “60 Minutes” and was “rather befuddled” by it.

He said Bannon’s comment that “the only reason the bishops care for immigrants is because we want to fill our churches and get more money” was insulting.

He also said he wanted to clarify Bannon’s remark that immigration issues are not part of church doctrine.

“He might be right,” the cardinal said: “it comes from the Bible itself,” which he said is very clear about treating immigrants with dignity and respect.

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Contributing to this report was Carol Zimmermann.

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