

# The New York Times

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## The priest who befriended the other side

*'If there's no dialogue, it's just raw power competing on both sides'*



**The Rev. Frank Pavone is the national director of Priests for Life.**

*Credit... Zack Wittman for The New York Times*

The Rev. Frank Pavone, 63, had an answer to the divisions over abortion:  
Acknowledge good people on the other side.

He was in high school in Westchester County when Roe v. Wade was decided and a senior when he attended his first March for Life in Washington. The event solidified his intention to become a priest, leading ultimately to his becoming the national director of Priests for Life.

Father Pavone recognized early on that “there’s really no compromise on the principles that each side is standing for,” but that the two sides could work to understand each other, he said. “Because if there’s no dialogue, it’s just raw power competing on both sides.”

So he visited abortion clinics with providers and tried to develop relationships. At conventions of the National Right to Life Committee, he got to know William Baird, a reproductive rights activist and abortion provider whose health clinic in Hempstead, N.Y., was firebombed in 1979. Mr. Baird picketed the anti-abortion conventions every year.

The two adversaries developed a friendship. When the rhetoric of those fighting abortion got too heated, Mr. Baird asked Father Pavone to “appeal to your flock to stop hate speech.” One year Father Pavone helped Mr. Baird set up his seven-foot “Cross of Oppression” that the latter used at demonstrations. Later, in 2002, they issued a joint statement calling for “respectful dialogue” to reduce “dangerous, dehumanizing assumptions about those on the opposite side of the issue.”

Father Pavone, who now lives in Brevard County, Fla., now questions whether such dialogue is still possible, because the politics are so entrenched. But he hopes that last month’s Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* provides an opening.

“What changes now is that the conversation can breathe and open up,” he said. “What *Dobbs* is saying to proponents of *Roe v. Wade*, as it says to us, is: Make your case to the voters, to the legislators, as to why abortion should be legal. Make the case on its merits, not simply on a declaration from on high that this is a constitutional right. I think that’s a significant change that will come into political races, will come into legislative debates, will come into court cases, even in places like New York.”