

Why the Vatican and the White House Are on the Outs

Inside the collapse of Washington's relationship with the first American pope.



THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION WANTED THE FIRST AMERICAN POPE TO SANCTIFY ITS AGENDA. LEO XIV HAD OTHER IDEAS. (ILLUSTRATION BY *THE FREE PRESS*; IMAGES VIA GETTY)

By Mattia Ferraresi

On Easter Sunday, Leo XIV urged world leaders to lay down weapons and choose peace—to drop the “desire to dominate others.” It was the culmination of a rhetorical escalation against the Iran war that grew in intensity over Holy Week, when he condemned “the imperialist occupation of the world” and warned that God rejects the prayers “of those who wage war.”

It's hard not to see these remarks as aimed directly at the leader of the free world and the Christians in his inner circle. President Donald Trump has not directly addressed the Pope's comments, but behind closed doors, tensions have been building for months—culminating in January, when senior U.S. defense officials summoned a top Vatican diplomat to the Pentagon. What happened inside that room set the tone for everything that followed: Vatican officials briefed on the meeting, who spoke with *The Free Press* on the condition of anonymity, described it as a bitter lecture warning that the United States has the military power to do whatever it wants—and that the Church had better take its side.

One might wonder why a government that has no apparent qualms about bombing foreign countries and capturing or killing tyrants would bother trying to court—or demand—the Vatican's favor. The answer lies in something easy to overlook: The Catholic Church is perhaps the only remaining global institution perceived to carry genuine moral authority. The Holy See, for all its imperfections and scandals, remains a body whose credibility the American superpower seeks. They know that Leo's blessing, or at least his silence, would confer a kind of moral legitimacy that no amount of power can manufacture on its own.

There are more practical considerations, too. Today, Catholicism is a dominant force in American conservative politics. The omnipresent Marco Rubio and a striking number of Trump's senior officials are Catholic. Vice President J.D. Vance converted in 2019. The Supreme Court has a Catholic supermajority. Trump won the majority of the Catholic vote in 2024, and alienating the Pope would complicate all of that.

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From the start, Leo's relationship with the White House was weighed down by the expectation that an American pontiff would establish a special bond with his country. But that special bond, if it ever existed, was doomed as early as Leo's first month as pope.



In May of 2025, two weeks after Leo was elected, Vance invited him to celebrate America's 250th birthday at the White House in 2026. The Holy See initially considered the invitation, according to a senior Vatican official, but a mix of foreign policy disagreements, the increasingly vocal opposition of U.S. bishops to Trump's immigration policy, and a reluctance to become a political bargaining chip in the 2026 midterms caused the Vatican to postpone the trip indefinitely.

Since then, relations between Rome and the U.S. have only gotten worse. In January, the pope outlined his own foreign policy vision in his inaugural "state of the world" address. In a pointed broadside against nations who choose military force over peaceful diplomacy, Leo declared that the post-WWII international order had been "completely undermined."

Shortly after the speech, Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby summoned the Holy See's then-ambassador to the U.S., Cardinal Christophe Pierre, to the Pentagon. The meeting may be unprecedented in the history of relations between the two countries—there is no public evidence of any Vatican official ever taking a meeting at the Pentagon.



Pope Leo XIV meets with Vice President J.D. Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Apostolic Palace on May 19, 2025, in Vatican City. (Simone Risoluti/Vatican Media via Vatican Pool via Getty Images)

According to both Vatican and U.S. officials briefed on the meeting, Pentagon brass picked apart the pontiff's January speech, reading it as a hostile message directed at Trump's policies. What particularly enraged the Pentagon, one Vatican official said, was the passage in which Leo appeared to challenge the Donroe Doctrine—Trump's update of the Monroe Doctrine, which asserts unchallenged American dominion over the Western Hemisphere.

In his speech, the Pope declared: "A diplomacy that promotes dialogue and seeks consensus among all parties is being replaced by a diplomacy based on force, by either individuals or groups of allies."

As tensions escalated, one U.S. official went so far as to invoke the Avignon Papacy, the period in the 1300s when the French Crown leveraged its military power to dominate the papal authority. The

Department of Defense and the Nunciature did not respond to requests for comment.

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Colby belongs to a cadre of Catholic and ostensibly dovish officials that Vance placed in the security apparatus who are now struggling to reconcile their isolationist instincts with the aggressive posture of a president who, within a single year, has bombed eight countries—with no sign of stopping.

In the weeks that followed the Pentagon meeting, the Church and the White House appeared similarly divided on matters of foreign policy. The head of the U.S. military archdiocese, Timothy Broglio, said that for soldiers, “it would be morally acceptable to disobey an order” after Trump threatened to invade Greenland in January. In February, when the Vatican refused to join Trump’s Board of Peace to oversee the reconstruction and post-war governance of the Gaza Strip, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, another Catholic, called the decision “deeply unfortunate.”

Then on March 1, as bombs rained down on Iran, the Vatican’s views on the administration’s foreign policy became impossible to ignore, with Leo coming out against the U.S. strikes, claiming “stability and peace are not built with mutual threats nor with weapons that sow destruction, pain, and death.”



These days, it seems most everyone associated with Trump is getting the Church's cold shoulder, even if they have no official connection to the White House. In March, Peter Thiel delivered his now-famous lectures on the Antichrist in Rome and was taken aback by the virulent reaction from parts of the Catholic world. The daily newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference ran a vitriolic campaign against Thiel, calling him the "heart of darkness of the digital world" with a "desperate and despairing" worldview. Two prominent theologians linked to pontifical universities, who were due to participate in the seminars, told me they withdrew at the last minute on orders from above.

What Rome so far hasn't addressed, though, is the growing choir of Catholic pundits injecting bigotry into the MAGA infosphere. Candace Owens, a Catholic convert, has said that Judaism is a "pedophile-centric religion." The openly antisemitic Nick Fuentes claims to speak from a "traditional Catholic" point of view. And then there's James Fishback, the "unapologetic Catholic" and long-shot candidate for governor in Florida, who told a black man he "should be lynched" during a public confrontation on the campaign trail.

Perhaps the Pope views these figures as marginal in the grand scheme of things. But for a pontiff increasingly drawn into the muddy waters of American politics, he has been conspicuously silent on the heretics who have moved from the political fringes into the mainstream.

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As the American right continues to suffer a moral identity crisis, the Trump administration's courtship of the American-born pontiff has grown all the more urgent. Since Leo declined Trump's invitation to

celebrate America's 250th birthday at the White House, "the administration tried every possible way to have the Pope in the U.S. in 2026," a Vatican official told me.

Instead, on July 4, 2026, the American pope will visit Lampedusa, a tiny island in the Mediterranean that serves as a gateway for North African migrants risking everything to reach Europe. No pope has ever been more aware of what that date means, and Leo is too deliberate to have chosen July 4 by accident.

One Vatican official put it bluntly: "The Pope may well never visit the United States under this administration."



Editor's Note: After publication, the Pentagon provided the following comment: "*The Free Press's* characterization of the meeting is highly exaggerated and distorted. The meeting between Pentagon and Vatican officials was a respectful and reasonable discussion. We have nothing but the highest regard and welcome continued dialogue with the Holy See."