Opinion
Guest Voices



The Federal Bureau of Investigation seal is seen at FBI headquarters before a 2018 news conference in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Yuri Gripas)



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The Richmond, Virginia, office of the FBI is worried about the interest that racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists have taken in radical-traditionalist Catholics, according to a leaked memo dated Jan. 23.

The bureau has recently prioritized dealing with domestic terrorism, especially from white nationalists, and is apparently concerned that violent extremists are seeking alliances with this far-right segment of conservative Catholicism.

The memo has been condemned by Barry Knestout, the Catholic bishop of Richmond, and others as a threat to the "constitutionally protected free exercise of religion." Conservative Catholics have seen it as further evidence of the Biden administration's antagonism toward religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular.

Twenty Republican state attorneys general, including Virginia's, wrote U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland and FBI Director Christopher Wray saying, "Anti-Catholic bigotry appears to be festering in the FBI, and the Bureau is treating Catholics as potential terrorists because of their beliefs."

To think of the FBI as anti-Catholic is ironic.

"The vast majority of FBI Agents over time have been Catholic," reports Kathleen McChesney, who was the third-highest person in the FBI when she left to work for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Recruitment was high at Canisius, Seton

Hall and other Catholic colleges. Most FBI applicants were/are not Ivy Leaguers but from first-generation college graduates of the middle class."

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The memo, which was for internal use in guiding agents, was quickly withdrawn by the bureau, which told Catholic News Agency that it "does not meet the exacting standards of the FBI." The memo was described as "appalling" by Garland in testimony to Congress March 1.

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Religious Liberty, seconded Knestout's comments. While condemning racism and violence, Dolan said "the leaked memorandum was nonetheless 'troubling and offensive' in several respects — such as in its religious profiling and reliance on dubious sourcing — and am glad it has been rescinded."

He went on to "encourage federal law enforcement authorities to take appropriate measures to ensure the problematic aspects of the memo do not recur in any of their agencies' work going forward."

How bad was the memo?

The memo does not accuse any Catholic or Catholic organization of being terrorists. What it is concerned about is the interest shown by racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, or RMVEs, in radical-traditionalist Catholic, or RTC, ideology. The authors fear that violent extremists may attempt to infiltrate their violent message into radical-traditionalist Catholic ideology and to recruit followers from organizations espousing it.

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As the memo states, "RMVEs will continue to find RTC ideology attractive and will continue to attempt to connect with RTC adherents, both virtually via social media and in person in places of worship."

The memo reports that already "RMVEs have sought out and attended traditionalist Catholic houses of worship, as well as used language indicative of adherence to RTC ideology in social media postings."

No evidence is given to support these assertions, but large sections of the memo are blacked out where the evidence may have been presented.

One can easily imagine replacing the word "Catholic" with "Islamic" in this memo where the FBI would worry about the Islamic State group or al-Qaida recruiting followers of "radical-traditionalist" Islam. Many of those criticizing the current memo would have found FBI concerns about radical-traditionalist Muslim groups quite reasonable.

After 9/11, the FBI made numerous mistakes in its approach to Islamic groups in the United States and eventually found that dialogue and transparency with these groups worked better than embedded spies. Hopefully, the FBI will not have to go through the same learning process in dealing with Catholic traditionalists.

Today, "there would not be undercover operations in religious organizations," explains McChesney. "That is a violation of attorney general guidelines and basically unconstitutional/illegal."



Kathleen McChesney (RNS/Courtesy of Kathleen McChesney)

On the other hand, "if persons who are of a particular religion are threatening, planning or committing crimes," says McChesney, "they would be pursued as individuals and not for their beliefs, but for what they are threatening, planning or doing."

The FBI memo focused on only a very small sliver of Catholicism; in fact, it is questionable whether radical-traditionalist Catholics can legitimately call themselves Catholic.

According to the FBI, who are these radical-traditionalist Catholics?

A footnote on Page 1 of the memo states, "RTCs are typically characterized by the rejection of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II); disdain for most of the popes elected since Vatican II, particularly Pope Francis and Pope John Paul II; and frequent adherence to anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, and white supremacist ideology."

The memo distinguishes these groups from what it terms "'traditionalist Catholics' who prefer the Traditional Latin Mass and pre-Vatican II teachings and traditions, but without the more extremist ideological beliefs and violent rhetoric." Some reporters and commentators have falsely accused the FBI of going after such traditionalists although the memo clearly excludes them.

In another footnote, on Page 2, the memo describes the Society of St. Pius X and the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter but does not identify them as a radical-traditionalist Catholic organization. The context of this footnote is unclear because the text footnoted is blacked out. However, it is safe to presume from the rest of the memo that the FBI considered these organizations "traditionalist" Catholics, not "radical-traditionalist" Catholics.

A footnote on Page 3 refers to Legio Christi, only to say it is not associated with the Legionaries of Christ. Almost the entire page is blacked out so there is no other information about the group.

The memo finally gets around to naming names by citing the Southern Poverty Law Center, which identifies nine radical-traditionalist Catholic hate groups:

1. Catholic Apologetics International (Greencastle, Pennsylvania);
2. Catholic Family News/Catholic Family Ministries Inc. (Niagara Falls, New York);
3. Christ or Chaos (Corsicana, Texas);
4. Culture Wars/Fidelity Press (South Bend, Indiana);
5. The Fatima Crusaders/International Fatima Rosary Crusade (Buffalo, New York);
6. In the Spirit of Chartres Committee (Glenelg, Maryland);
7. The Remnant/The Remnant Press (Forest Lake, Minnesota);
8. Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Town of Richmond, New Hampshire);
9. Tradition in Action (Los Angeles).

The memo gives no information showing that these groups are hate groups but simply cites the testimony of the Southern Poverty Law Center. For its part, the center documents the antisemitic nature of these groups but does not accuse them

of actual violence.

It is problematic that the FBI depends on an outside organization to classify organizations as hate groups.



U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland leaves the podium at the U.S. Justice Department in Washington Aug. 11, 2022. (CNS/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

"The SPLC has produced some excellent information in the past," says McChesney. "However, the FBI should be using its own data and information from human and other sources."

In testimony before Congress, Garland agreed that the FBI "should not be relying on any single organization without doing its own work."

In support of its allegation that there is a "growing overlap between the far-right white nationalist movement and RTCs," the memo points to "the increasing collaboration of the far-right Catholic media outlet Church Militant (and its activist wing, the Resistance network) with the America First/groyper movement."

A footnote explains that "groyper refers to followers of Nick Fuentes's alt-right 'America First' movement, which is characterized by its white Christian nationalism platform." Fuentes, who identifies as Catholic, was kicked off Twitter twice for spouting late-night obscenities and conspiratorial and antisemitic musings.

Where the FBI memo truly goes off the rails is when it cites an increase in "hostility toward abortion-rights advocates on social media" as evidence for "the ongoing convergence of the far-right white nationalist movement and RTCs."

Unless this "hostility" involves threats of violence, the FBI is way off base here.

"It is not a good report," concludes McChesney. "This isn't typical of the FBI as I knew it, and I think I can go out on a limb and say it is likely not typical now."

McChesney thinks: "This was a horrible moment for the FBI. It will require retraining, better supervision and a new process or two to overcome it."

On the other hand, she does not think the memo is a threat to religious freedom, "but it could be perceived that way." As a result, she suggests, "the FBI needs to hit this head-on with Catholic leaders locally and nationally; explain what the objective/point was. And they can learn from the bishops, too."

At the same time, "we would be naive to think that some persons who call themselves Catholic do not hesitate to take an unlawful approach to achieving their goals," says McChesney. "Think of the shootings of abortion providers. Those offenders do not get a free pass because they say/think the Catholic Church would want them to do that."

The FBI memo was a serious mistake the bureau needs to address, especially granted the bad history of the agency's surveillance of religious groups. On the other hand, those who think the FBI is coming after traditional Catholics are being

paranoid.