News



Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, left, is shown in this 2021 file photo following the funeral Mass of Galveston-Houston Auxiliary Bishop George Sheltz. (CNS/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)



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The controversial Catholic bishop of Tyler, Texas, announced May 12 on Twitter that he believes Pope Francis is "undermining the Deposit of Faith."

Bishop Joseph Strickland, a vocal critic of Francis who in recent years has invited the pope to "fire" him and endorsed videos attacking the current pontiff as a "diabolically disordered clown," said he acknowledges the validity of Francis' election to the papacy, but exhorted: "Follow Jesus."

Strickland questioned Francis' fidelity to the Catholic faith in a tweet in which he sought to distance himself from statements made by a far-right Catholic podcaster who has questioned whether Francis is the real bishop of Rome.

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The provocative tweet prompted some priests, deacons and Catholic intellectuals on Twitter to accuse Strickland of flirting with schism and of disobeying his episcopal vow of obedience to the pope.

"Sorry to read those comments, Bishop. If that's where your conscience is leading you, you should do the honorable thing and resign," Deacon William T. Ditewig, the former director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for the Diaconate, tweeted in response to Strickland.

On May 13, Strickland appeared to backtrack, somewhat, by tweeting that schismatic movements and sedevacantists, those who believe that there the chair of St. Peter is empty, are "an injury to the body of Christ."

"We must fight for total unity, not just aspects of Catholicism," Strickland tweeted.

However, Strickland also later walked back a comment in that tweet in which he referred to the Society of St. Pius X as "schismatic." The society, a breakaway group of traditionalist clerics who do not recognize the reforms of the Second Vatican

Council, has an irregular canonical status in the church. Strickland tweeted that the "SSPX continues to hold Tradition out for the Universal Church."

While Strickland attempted to distance himself from the far-right podcaster, Patrick Coffin, the bishop was featured as a guest speaker for an online "summit" that Coffin's organization, "Hope is Fuel," hosted on March 18.

On May 12, the Hope is Fuel website listed Strickland as one of several speakers who "came together to offer time-tested solutions for anxiety, depression, and despair beyond dangerous drugs, outdated theories, and New Agey platitudes to bring about hope and healing."

The website on May 15 no longer named Strickland among the featured speakers, although it still mentioned that "a respected Catholic bishop" had participated in the event alongside "six mental health experts" and a former professional athlete.



Patrick Coffin on the Hopeisfuel.com website (screenshot)

Coffin, a former host of the Catholic Answers Live radio show, in recent years has veered to the hard right. He has accused Francis of being an "anti-pope" and has argued that Pope Benedict XVI's February 2013 resignation was invalid, even while

claiming before Benedict's death in December 2022 that those positions did not make him a sedevacantist.

When Benedict died, Coffin tweeted that the See of Rome was "now vacant," and he prayed that the cardinals who elected Francis in the March 2013 conclave would "do the right thing, and avoid yet another antipope."

Through his "Hope is Fuel" initiative, Coffin is hosting a new series of online presentations and lectures delivered by a mix of mainstream conservative Catholics like Janet Smith and Christopher West, as well as relatively unknown figures and far-right fringe characters like podcaster Tim Gordon and E. Michael Jones, an author who has made antisemitic comments on social media.

At least two mainstream voices in Catholic evangelization circles, biblical scholar Jeff Cavins and seminary theology professor Ralph Martin, were listed as presenters in Hope is Fuel's "Signature Catholic Course" as of May 12, but their names have since been removed.

Jesuit Fr. Robert Spitzer, the retired president of Gonzaga University who founded and now leads the nonprofit Magis Center of Reason and Faith, had also been listed as one of the Hope is Fuel presenters. On May 11, the Magis Center tweeted a statement in which Spitzer said he had just learned of Coffin's statements questioning the validity of Francis' election.

"I do not hold this position and would never hold this position," said Spitzer, who added that he had asked that his interview with Coffin "be withdrawn from the series, and that my name not be associated with the series or other projects [Coffin] is hosting, including advertising etc."

On May 12, Strickland quote-tweeted Spitzer's statement, adding that he "fully" endorsed Spitzer's stance "regarding any statements from Patrick Coffin regarding Pope Francis." A little more than 12 hours later, seeking to "clarify" his position on Coffin's statements, Strickland tweeted his disagreement with those statements while accusing Francis of undermining the Catholic faith.

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