News



At the March 19 "Catholic Prayer for Trump" at Mar-a-Lago, a man identified as "Father Dennis" prayed for attendees and the Trump family, and blessed the meal. The $1,000-a-ticket black-tie event was organized by Catholics for Catholics, an Arizona-based nonprofit. (NCR screenshot/Rumble/Real America's Voice)



by Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 21, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Featuring apocalyptic rhetoric tinged with Christian nationalism and grievances popular in far-right circles, the March 19 "Catholic Prayer for Trump" event at the former president's residence in Palm Beach, Florida, presented a bleak portrait of life in the United States.

Advertised as a prayerful gathering purposely scheduled on the solemnity of St. Joseph, several speakers at the Mar-a-Lago resort described a country on the brink, where "cultural marxists" in government manipulate the levers of power to imprison Christians and like-minded "patriots" who speak inconvenient truths about stolen elections, sexuality, gender, abortion and COVID-19 vaccines.

The event's organizers invoked St. Joseph's patronage of "the vast campaign of the Church against world Communism" that Pope Pius XI bestowed on the saint in his 1937 encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* ("On Atheistic Communism").

Standing firm against those "enemies at the gates," as one speaker described it, is former President Donald Trump, who was presented as "the only Catholic option" for voters this election year and the one presidential candidate who can begin to "restore" the United States and defeat "atheistic communism."

"President Trump is our protection against that. We need to get behind him," John Yep, the president of Catholics for Catholics, said at the event. The Arizona-based nonprofit organized the $1,000-a-ticket black-tie event at Mar-a-Lago.

Incorporated in September 2022, Yep's group has made a quick, outsized impact in the arena of Catholic political engagement by forming allegiances with so-called "alt-right" political leaders and promoting an unapologetic blend of Catholic doctrine and right-wing nationalism.

The dinner program advertised a speaker lineup of heavyweights on the political far right, such as Roger Stone, the self-described "dirty trickster," and retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who served briefly as Trump's national security adviser.

Invoking Psalm 23, Flynn told his audience that the United States is in "the valley of the shadow of death."

"This nation was built on a set of judeo-Christian principles and values, and we have to be fearless about that," Flynn said.

Mainstream conservative Catholics and political figures were also advertised as feature speakers, including chastity speaker Jason Evert*, Daily Wire host Michael Knowles and James Caviezel, the actor who played Jesus in "The Passion of the Christ."

Knowles, who generated controversy in 2023 when he called for "transgenderism" to be "eradicated" from public life, at Mar-a-Lago accused liberals of hijacking children's education for "their most effective attack on the family."

Said Knowles, "Parents might not want pornography in their kids' elementary schools. They might not want drag queens reading to their children in the libraries. They may not want teachers calling their son Sally in the fifth grade. But that's just too bad, according to the libs."

The Mar-a-Lago event was broadcast live in part by Real America's Voice, a right-wing outlet that promotes conspiracy theories prevalent on the far right, including QAnon.



A view of the Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida (Wikimedia Commons/Jud McCranie)

After calling on a man he identified as "Father Dennis" to pray for the attendees and Trump family, and to bless the meal, Yep introduced a video of Trump reciting the Pledge of Allegiance spliced with patriotic images and an audio recording of the "J6 Prison Choir" singing the national anthem.

Composed of several jailed individuals accused of crimes related to the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol, the J6 Prison Choir's rendition of the Star Spangled Banner has been a regular feature at Trump's campaign rallies.

The video shown at Mar-a-Lago highlighted instances of police officers fighting back against people storming the U.S. Capitol, and depicted men wearing orange jumpsuits in lonely prison cells before ending with the message: "Supporting certain prisoners denied their constitutional rights."

Yep, a 39-year-old former seminarian who has said he spent 14 years discerning priesthood with the Legionaries of Christ, called on other speakers to highlight what he described were "non-negotiable" issues for Catholics, such as opposing abortion, and the right to worship.



Organizers for "Catholic Prayer for Trump" said the March 19 event at Mar-a-Lago drew 1,000 Catholics. It was broadcast live in part by Real America's Voice, a right-wing outlet that promotes conspiracy theories prevalent on the far right, including QAnon. (NCR screenshot/Rumble/Real America's Voice)

The program linked "right to worship" with examples of what speakers said were cases of a "weaponized" government arresting political enemies, such as Peter Navarro, a former Trump adviser who is serving four months in federal prison for ignoring a subpoena from the congressional committee that investigated the Jan. 6 attack.

"He was locked up because he refused to submit, he refused to surrender, he kept the faith, because he kept the courage of his convictions," said Jack Posobiec, a far-right conspiracy theorist who described Navarro as a hero and "a political prisoner."

During his speech, Posobiec said more than 1,000 Catholics attended the event at Mar-a-Lago, all in a collective effort "to destroy communism and save Western civilization."

"The hour is growing short. The time is growing late. We do not have much time left," said Posobiec, who is Catholic. He focused his remarks on presenting what he suggested was a historical overview of communism, which he linked with the anticlerical and anti-elitist attitudes that fueled the 18th century French Revolution.



Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life and a former priest, was among antiabortion activists who spoke at the March 19 "Catholic Prayer for Trump" event. Pavone, seen in a Jan. 24, 2020, file photo, was removed from the clerical state in December 2022. (CNS/Long Island Catholic/Gregory Shemitz)

“The French Revolution itself was a proto-communist revolution,” said Posobiec, who claimed that the same ideology that led to French Carmelite nuns being martyred and Paris’ Cathedral of Notre Dame being desecrated during the 1790s is now corroding the United States under the guises of "wokeism," social justice and "cultural Marxism."

Americans, Posobiec said, can accept those forms of supposed Marxist ideology or "choose to restore the United States as it was founded in its original form." Of cultural Marxists, Posobiec vowed to publish a book that will "use their playbook against them."

"And we will specifically call them that which they are," Posobiec said. "Because they reject the human rights of others, they reject the humanity of their oppressed

classes, I submit to you that they themselves have become the unhuman."

On the right-to-life issue, the event featured remarks from antiabortion activists Terry Beatley, Patricia Sandoval and Frank Pavone, the national director of Priests for Life and an ardent supporter of the former president.

"The government has no authority to authorize the killing of a baby, period," said Pavone, a former priest whom the Vatican removed from the clerical state in December 2022 for what it said were "blasphemous communications on social media" as well as "persistent disobedience" of his bishop.

Advertisement

Being disciplined by the Vatican has not blunted Pavone's rhetoric nor his support for Trump. Speaking of the former president, Pavone said to applause at Mar-a-Lago: "We are gathered tonight at the home of the most pro-life candidate this country has ever seen. And he will continue to be."

Artur Pawlowski, a Polish Canadian evangelical street preacher and political activist who clashed with Canadian authorities because of his protests of public health protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic, declared that Christians in North America are being denied their right to worship God and live in peace.

Also declaring Trump to be the rightful president of the United States, Pawlowski said America "belongs to God," adding that there could be "no free America without the God of Freedom."

Said Pawloski, "America, bring God back to America. The cross and the flag, married together under a holy matrimony of freedom."

*__*Clarification*__: *After publication of this article, Jason Evert wrote to NCR to say that while he had initially agreed to speak at the March 19 "Catholic Prayer for Trump" event at Former President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, he later decided not to participate.*