Opinion
Guest Voices



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Last Halloween, Erin posted on her Instagram account @ewolfemama that she wanted to be a "Trad Wife" for Halloween. At first it seemed satirical, but layered over videos of her homeschooling, homesteading and home-cooking, it soon became clear that Erin was serious.

"I think I'll just be this for the rest of my life (GOD WILLING!)," she posted in the video caption. Erin is one of a number of traditional Catholic women joining the #tradwife movement, which first began over a decade ago with the intention of promoting traditional gender roles.

One of the first articles documenting the #tradwife movement was published by The Guardian in 2020, and to date, Protestant English founder of the Darling Academy Alena Kate Pettitt is recognized as one of the movement's founding leaders. The movement is more well-known, however, among American, evangelical women who make everything they eat, wear and produce.

Trad wives are now on every social media platform, in Facebook groups, on Instagram and TikTok. These influencers, along with their followers, argue for the return to a nostalgic 1940s-1960s version of womanhood as a stay-at-home mother and wife.

As Jacqueline Beatty wrote in Time magazine, each generation of American women is reminded by patriarchal leaders of their natural submissive role, whether through advertisements, film, television or social media.

In conservative Catholic circles, traditionalist Catholic leaders echo this reminder with a call for a return to a time before the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council and extolling the virtue of American women who have chosen to reject the "secular" pressure of working or not having children. For these leaders, seeking out "truer" Catholic traditions also involves returning to ways of living, dressing and raising children that predate Vatican II.

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In response, a minority of Catholic women like Gabriela (@thecandidcatholic), Nicole LeBlanc (@nicolita_d), Molly Ann (@simplymollyann), Birgitta Cook (@traditionalcatholicvoyage), and convert Ashley Grosch (founder of

@thefarmlifemovement) are claiming the trad wife title as their own, conflating a culture of homeschooling, home-cooked meals and home altars with a return to pre-Vatican II religious and social ethics.

Many traditionalist Catholics believe that life pre-Vatican II fell in line with their conservative social and political values, whether or not this is true. Thus, they have aligned themselves with modern far-right political movements that promise the protection of the Catholic housewife and her family.

One example is the Kolbe's Little Flowers Instagram account run by Thérèse, a Catholic wife, mom of six homeschooled kids and speech pathologist. Her Instagram bio includes many buzzwords: "Pro-Life; Patriotic; Latin Mass; Books; Knitting; Embroidery; Etsy Shop; Humor." With a February post about how communism has threatened the Catholic Church, Thérèse highlights how this contingent is developing into a Catholic nationalist movement.

Like trad wives, these Catholic women reject modern values surrounding gender, vocally distancing themselves from the fourth- and fifth-wave feminist movements that seek intersectionality and gender equity. Modern-day feminist movements also deconstruct both the restrictions and privileges of white female homemakers during the 1940s-1960s, but Catholic trad wives argue that these roles — devoting an entire life to bearing and raising "little saints" (a common term across Instagram) — is a form of liberation that celebrates divine womanhood.



(Unsplash/Pro Church Media)

Trad wives collectively counter fourth- and fifth-wave feminism by arguing that a strict gender binary is the only way for women to retain their rights and communities, similar to how the Vatican said that the binary between men and women is sacred and inherent in the recent *Dignitas Infinita*. It's a flawed, sexist and queerphobic argument that claims Catholic wives and traditional Catholic families cannot coexist in a world with secular schools, *novus ordo* Masses and progressive gender values.

But it's still an incredibly effective argument. Catholic trad wives' fear of secular worldviews is also closely interwoven with Catholic leadership. Pope Francis described this as the fight against "ideological colonization" and "gender theory," as quoted in *Dignitas Infinita*.

What sets Catholic trad wives apart from their mainline Protestant counterparts, however, is their emphasis on Mary. Many Catholic trad wives model their appearance and behavior after a decidedly Euro-American Mary. I have documented the growth of veiling traditions among traditionalist Catholic women, who describe how wearing the veil made them like Mary, who is almost universally pictured with a long flowing veil.

But like other trad wives, this also includes wearing modest clothing and opting for "no-makeup" makeup looks that prioritize a "true femininity" and "true modesty." Catholic single mother Abbey Lisieux (@abbeylisieux) uses the term "soft femininity" on her Instagram account.

Most Catholic trad wives mirror the wider trad wife movement with homesteading, or a form of rural, faith-based living exemplified by separatist Catholic communities like those in St. Marys, Kansas. Gabriela, Cook and Grosch are closely involved in homesteading and natural healing.

Gabriela recently shared in a video caption that her son is "not suffocated by the expectations of the world, not indoctrinated by the public school system, not tethered down by the pressures of how his Mama & Dada 'should' be doing things instead — just free as a bird."

For Grosch, the call she felt to become Catholic was a call to return to an ancestral Catholic church. "Everything I preach and embody is rooted in ancestral health and beliefs," she shared in an April 1 post, "including faith."

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It is this performance of hyperfemininity that allows Catholic tradwives to conflate themselves with a self-sacrificial Mary. Her emphatic yes at the Annunciation is the model of submission to God and to men, her motherhood is seen as her divine vocation, and, thus, Mary becomes the ideal Catholic trad wife. Mirroring her is not only a vocation toward sainthood but also the only way to raise "little saints."

Many Catholic trad wife influencers use the term "divine womanhood," but it actually dates to New Age spirituality — specifically the Goddess Worship movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Strangely, both conservative Christian trad wives and some New Age spiritualists overlap in their gender essentialism. Just as body witches celebrate menstruation and pregnancy as actions of holy power, so do Catholic trad wives view having and raising children as an inherent vocation. Pregnancy is a key part of Mary's story — the carrying, birthing and raising of Jesus speaks to Mary's veneration and why she takes on the role of Mediatrix, or intercessor between people praying on Earth and God.

Thus, Marian devotionals like rosaries, miraculous medals and scapulars are extremely popular among Catholic trad wives. Several Catholic trad wives even create their own material cultures, such as child-safe rosaries, saint dolls, child-size vestments, and saint story books for parents hoping to raise their children in a decidedly Catholic way.

Just as the church calls Catholics to face persecution for their faith, many trad wives view their lives and influences on social media as a vocation in and of itself. Their digital martyrdom, they argue, is further evidence of how the "secular world" disenfranchises American Catholic women fighting for their way of life.

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Thus, the growth of Catholic trad wife contingents uses the same tactics from the 1960s and '70s that fought against the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Republican politician Phyllis Schlafly, a devout Catholic woman, gained supporters for her STOP ERA movement by arguing that when the ERA passed, it would remove protections afforded to homemakers, forcing them to go to work and leave their children — despite the ERA doing exactly the opposite.

Schlafly mobilized a group of untapped voters — Protestant, Mormon and Catholic housewives — for her counter rally at the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston and as fervent supporters of Republican candidates, including Ronald Reagan's presidential race.

This same fear of losing a way of life that far-right American politicians exploit today impacts how Catholic trad wives believe that progressive political action will destroy the sacred role of mother and wife.

My concern is not only that the Catholic trad wife minority is growing but that, like Schlafly, it's mobilizing a group of conservative Catholic voters who see the return to pre-Vatican II life as both a religious and political issue.

The number of Republican Catholics who hold unfavorable views of Pope Francis has risen to 35% in the last 11 years. Through their connection with mainline trad wife influencers and their far-right Republican counterparts, Catholic trad wives are part of a growing contingent of Catholic voters who conflate the fight for traditionalist Catholicism with the fight for conservative American political values. They often identify as part of the pro-life generation, mirroring a growing number of young priests who are more traditionally Catholic and politically conservative.

With the 2024 presidential election fast approaching, this growing Catholic trad wife movement will likely play an important role in how Catholics vote in the election, and future American political and Catholic leaders.

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