News



Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki gives the invocation for the eventing session of the Republican National Convention July 15, 2024, in Milwaukee. (AP/Morry Gash)



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The Republican National Convention has been replete with religious symbolism and talk about God. Some quote scripture; others petition God to bless America. Vendors are hawking "God Bless the U.S.A." Bibles with Donald Trump on the cover. And speaker after speaker has credited the Divine with saving the former president from a would-be assassin's bullet.

"God spared President Trump from that assassin because God isn't finished with him yet," Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Tuesday night. Former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson quoted Isaiah, concluding, "I have no doubt that God lowered a shield of protection around President Trump."

A convention-goer's T-shirt summarized the pervasive belief that God is on the side of the Republican Party: "GOD (and a good guy with a gun) saved the U.S.A."

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Yet for all the God talk, there have been few explicitly religious events, and little organized Catholic presence at the four-day convention.

Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki gave Monday's opening prayer, calling for a moment of silence for Corey Comperatore, the father killed at the Trump rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, and for those injured there.

"We pray that you assist our elected officials and candidates always to protect our freedoms, to preserve our democracy and to govern fairly," Listecki said. "Grant them the wisdom every day to place the good of our nation above personal interest and to cherish our union."

Two downtown Milwaukee churches — Old St Mary's and the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist — opened their doors to convention-goers, with daily Masses, adoration and confession. Church volunteers at Old St. Mary's, which is about six blocks from the Fiserv Forum convention center, told NCR that a few people had stopped by, but among the 35 Mass-goers at Wednesday's noon Mass, no attendees were visible with their convention lanyards or clear tote bags.

A makeshift chapel in the Baird Center near the forum offers prayer services for various denominations, including twice-daily Catholic ones, which are led by Frank Pavone, the director of Priests for Life who was dismissed from the priesthood in 2022 for engaging in partisan political advocacy inconsistent with his role as a member of the Catholic clergy.



About 35 Mass-goers attend Wednesday's noon Mass at Old St. Mary's, about six blocks from the Fiserv Forum convention center where the Republican National Convention is being held July 15-18. (NCR photo/Heidi Schlumpf)

Although about two dozen folks came to a Tuesday afternoon prayer service, Wednesday's event was sparsely attended, with only three or four attendees plus organizers. (Marjorie Taylor Green was signing books outside the room.)

Two active Catholic political groups said they did not have a presence at the convention. Catholics for Catholics, a group that hosted a prayer event for Trump at Mar-a-Lago in March and in June launched a controversial "Masses for Trump" campaign, told NCR they were not attending the convention.

CatholicVote, the group that used cell phone geofencing to target Catholic parishioners with pro-Trump ads in 2020, also said they were sitting out the convention. According to a priest who is CatholicVote's chaplain, the group was meeting in Indianapolis this week, where thousands of Catholics were set to gather for the National Eucharistic Congress, which overlaps with the Republican convention.

In Milwaukee, a prayer breakfast scheduled for Thursday morning at the convention was closed to the press. That event is sponsored by the Faith and Freedom Coalition, which was founded by Christian Coalition co-founder Ralph Reed in 2009 and primarily represents evangelical Protestant voters.

Local organizer John Pudner told NCR that he is "one of few Catholics in our group which is more evangelical focused." The prayer breakfast was to feature an appearance by Alexander Spellane, CEO of Fisher Capital Group and host of the Right Wing Voice podcast. Other speakers' names were not available as of press time.

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>
> — Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki
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But evangelical Christians are not only the only religious voices at the convention. Republican Jewish Coalition CEO Matthew Brooks spoke from the stage on Tuesday, and his group had a "salute to pro-Israel elected officials" event planned for Thursday. The American Jewish Committee also hosted three events, including a diplomatic reception and a panel focused on "Israel and the Path to Peace."

In addition to Listecki's prayer, invocations and benedictions were offered by Greek Orthodox Archbishop Elpidophoros, the Rev. James Roemke of Kenosha's Messiah Lutheran Church, a congregation in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, and Harmeet Kaur Dhillon of the Republican National Committee for California, who led the assembly in a Sikh prayer.

The latter drew condemnation from some far-right Catholic commentators. Christian nationalist and white supremacist Nick Fuentes derided the prayer as "blasphemy," incorrectly condemning it as a "Satanic Hindu prayer." Conservative commentator Candace Owens, a recent convert to Catholicism, said: "This is not something that patriots are rallying behind."

Catholic voices also joined some of the counter-events that advocated for progressive causes and pushed back on some of the language of the GOP convention. A protest march on Monday included groups against racism and war and for climate justice and immigrants' rights. According to news reports, it included both pro-life and pro-choice marchers.

At a July 14 "Rally for Democracy," sponsored by the Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH) the day before the opening of the convention, Fr. Bryan Massingale called white Christian nationalism "an idolatrous faith, a blasphemous faith" and instead urged the creation of the "beloved community."

"We need to make a choice. Our nation is at a crossroad," Massingale said. "We have a choice between the way of fear and the way of love. And don't tell me I'm unrealistic. My love is just as real as your fear."

"Yes, the odds are against us," he said. "But God is in the business of working miracles."

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.
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