News



Attorney John Eastman, an architect of a legal strategy aimed at keeping former President Donald Trump in power, listens to questions from reporters after a hearing in Los Angeles June 20, 2023. (AP/Jae C. Hong)



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John Eastman, who faces multiple criminal charges as a key architect of Donald Trump's last-gasp attempt to overturn the 2020 election, was invited by an exclusive Catholic membership organization for business leaders to speak at their upcoming gathering in Southern California.

The next monthly meeting of the Orange County chapter of Legatus is Oct. 8, exactly four weeks from this year's presidential election. During the evening event, business leaders and executives will have the opportunity to attend confession and Mass, pray the Rosary — and, according to a flyer obtained by NCR, hear a lecture by Eastman, a lifelong Catholic, titled "a nonpartisan state of the union."

Catholics with a range of ideological stances, including current and past Legatus members, expressed dismay at the speaker selection, with some voicing surprise and others saying the choice underscores the partisan bent of a group whose members exercise outsized influence in the Catholic Church.

Eastman and Legatus' Orange County and national representatives did not respond to emails or phone calls seeking comment.

To invite Eastman, especially so close to the election and amid a particularly toxic political climate, is like "tossing a match on kerosene," said Msgr. Arthur Holquin, who served as chaplain to the Orange Country Legatus chapter about 20 years ago and is a former top official in the Orange Diocese.

Holquin called Legatus an "excellent organization" and said he'd met "wonderful people, exemplary Catholics" throughout his chaplaincy. But featuring Eastman is "very imprudent," he said, adding there is an "obvious speciousness to the title of the talk."

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Steve Dzida, a Catholic attorney in Orange County, said Eastman has been a scandal both for the church and the legal profession. "He has gone off the rails," said Dzida.

If the group was providing him with an opportunity "to confess his sins and express regret, I wouldn't have a problem with that," the lawyer said. "If it's a platform to defend his actions, it's certainly not going to be in service of our faith."

The Orange County chapter meetings typically draw about 100 members, according to a business leader in the group interviewed by NCR.

Eastman, who's been a member of Legatus, clerked for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and is founding director of the Center for Constitutional Jurisprudence at the Claremont Institute, a conservative think tank. For the bulk of his career, he taught at Chapman University's law school in Orange, resigning in 2021 after faculty demanded he be removed.

Also on his resume: running for California attorney general, fighting against legal marriage for same-sex couples, and filing a plethora of legal briefs, with many attempting to undergird religious freedom or shrink the scope of the so-called administrative state.

In 2020, Eastman was invited to join Trump's legal team in order to help prepare for "anticipated post-election litigation," according to a legal filing related to the House committee investigation of the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol attack.



A supporter of then-President Donald Trump breaks a window at the U.S. Capitol in Washington Jan. 6, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Leah Millis)

California Judge Yvette Roland in March of this year recommended Eastman be stripped of his ability to practice law in the state. (Currently, his law license is suspended in both California and Washington, D.C.) In her ruling, the judge said Eastman engaged in lawsuits that deliberately misrepresented facts and that he promoted a "wild theory for the benefit of his client's desire to retain the presidency."

Drawing upon fringe legal theories, Eastman drafted memos laying out scenarios in which then-Vice President Mike Pence could reject electors and keep Trump in office. His advice "functioned as a serpent in the ear" of the then-president, Pence's lawyer wrote in an email to Eastman as rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol.

Eastman also spoke at the rally preceding the riot, shouting false claims of election fraud to the crowd.

Last month, several counts filed against Eastman in a Georgia election interference case were dismissed, though six charges, including racketeering, remain. In Arizona, he is charged with fraud, forgery and conspiracy for his role in efforts to overturn Trump's loss in the state.

Eastman has pleaded not guilty to all charges and depicts his detractors as extreme leftists. At the National Conservatism Conference in D.C. this summer, Eastman encouraged attendees "to engage in this war" against the left.

To help cover the cost of his legal battles, Eastman is attempting to raise $1.5 million on GiveSendGo, a Christian fundraising site that's allowed white supremacists to solicit donations. As of Oct. 4, Eastman had raised nearly $900,000.

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Legatus (Latin for "ambassador" — with members tasked to be "ambassadors for Christ in the marketplace") was established in 1987 by the conservative Catholic business magnate Tom Monaghan, founder of Domino's Pizza and Ave Maria University in Florida. Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, past president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is an ecclesiastical adviser to the group.

Based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with around 95 chapters in the United States and Canada, the organization is known for drawing wealthy Catholic executives. Many members overlap with the Napa Institute, a conservative Catholic think tank founded by Timothy Busch.

Busch, as of last year a board member of the Catholic media conglomerate EWTN (described as the Catholic Fox News by some critics) and backer of Republican candidates, is a member of the Orange County chapter. He credits Legatus with changing his personal and business life for the better.

Leonard Leo, an engineer of the Supreme Court's supermajority, was a Legatus member as of 2015. (Both men also have ties to Opus Dei, a clerical and lay organization that's recently been accused of human trafficking crimes in Argentina. Opus Dei leaders have denied the accusations.)

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Barbara Born is a Catholic in Orange County who supports church reform groups and has ministered to homeless individuals in the region. Born said she sees the choice of Eastman as part of a broader problem — that Legatus has a web of influence in the diocese, while "regular people have little voice."

She pointed to how Legatus members, including Busch, helped plan and secure funding for the renovation of the former Crystal Cathedral into Christ Cathedral campus in Garden Grove, California, which is home to diocesan offices and EWTN's West Coast studios.

EWTN, with links to anti-Pope Francis extremists as well as conservative money, decided not to air live coverage of the 2022 Democratic-led House committee investigations into the Jan. 6 insurrection. The hearings were broadcast on all major U.S. networks except Fox News.

The influence of Legatus means certain ideological views are amplified "and there is nothing done to balance it," Born said.

John Limb is the former publisher of Oregon Catholic Press, a Portland-based organization that produces the missals used at many U.S. Catholic parishes.

Limb said when the Portland chapter of Legatus was established, he was eager to join a professional group aimed at helping Catholic CEOs confront business challenges in a manner consistent with their faith.

"It quickly became apparent," said Limb, that "politics, rather than business, seemed to be Legatus' primary focus. So I discontinued my membership after a couple years."



An image of John Eastman, left, and former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is displayed on a screen as the House select committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol holds a hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington Oct. 13, 2022. (AP/Andrew Harnik, Pool)

Limb said he's not surprised the Orange County chapter is featuring Eastman, though he said labeling the talk "nonpartisan" strikes him as an oxymoron. He surmised that perhaps the chapter is attempting to protect its nonprofit status with the title or wants to "make his talk sound more palatable to the less conservative members of the chapter."

Still, Eastman likely will be "preaching to the choir," said Limb.

Several members of the metaphorical choir, however, were deeply concerned about the choice. Holquin said two individuals told him they were "incensed."

Another member, who asked to remain anonymous so as not to jeopardize their business relationships with others in Legatus, referenced part of the ruling by Roland, the California judge.

"Eastman has exhibited an unwillingness to acknowledge any ethical lapses regarding his actions, demonstrating an apparent inability to accept responsibility," wrote the judge. "This lack of remorse and accountability presents a significant risk that Eastman may engage in further unethical conduct, compounding the threat to the public."

Reading this ruling, said the individual in an email, "causes one to wonder why a beloved Legatus chapter would enter into such a political statement at this time and place," rather than promoting "Catholic leadership in the business community as it should."

Inviting Eastman, added Holquin, is not "nurturing the common good, and that's what we should be doing as Catholics."

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