Opinion
Guest Voices



Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband Doug Emhoff at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle for an Inauguration Day Mass on Jan. 20, 2021, in Washington. (Evan Vucci/Associated Press)

Nate Tinner-Williams

View Author Profile

Black Catholic Messenger

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

October 25, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

With Election Day less than two weeks away, former President Donald Trump and his running mate, Sen. JD Vance of Ohio, are ramping up claims of anti-Catholic discrimination on the part of Democrat presidential candidate Kamala Harris.

Though the idea stems back to her time as a public official on the West Coast, her decision to skip this month's Catholic-sponsored Al Smith Dinner in New York — a political tradition no major candidate has rebuffed since 1984 — is seen by some conservative Catholics as a sign of disrespect.

Trump called the move an "insult," also taking issue with the video message she sent in her stead, featuring a Catholic schoolgirl comedy sketch with "Saturday Night Live" contributor Molly Shannon.

The snub came a week after one of Harris' top surrogates, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, posted a controversial social media video that some — including Michigan's Catholic bishops — construed as a slight against the Sacrament of Communion. (Whitmer later apologized for how the clip was received.)

On Thursday, Vance — himself a Catholic convert — published a swing-state op-ed in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette arguing that Harris has a long "record of bigotry" toward members of America's largest Christian denomination, dating back to her four-year term as junior senator in California.

Related: Catholic voters favor Trump in most battleground states, according to new NCR poll

"In 2018, she attacked Brian C. Buescher, a federal district court nominee, over his membership in the Knights of Columbus, a 142-year-old Catholic fraternal organization dedicated to public service," wrote Vance, suggesting she intended to paint the judge as unfit for office due to his Catholic faith.

Harris was also criticized for her 2019 "Do No Harm Act," which would have reduced the ability of religiously affiliated healthcare providers to refuse abortion, contraception, and other government-contracted medical services.

Finally, Vance took aim at her current role as second-in-command to President Joe Biden, under whom the FBI surveilled traditionalist Catholics for alleged connections

to violent extremism. The Department of Justice also brought charges against a Catholic anti-abortion activist in 2022 following a skirmish with a Planned Parenthood worker in Pennsylvania. (He was later acquitted.)

> On the national scale, it is spurious to argue that Harris will struggle with the "Catholic vote" due to any supposed discrimination. Though swing-state Catholics generally lean conservative, Black and Hispanic Catholics nationally are planning to vote for Harris — as they did to great effect in 2020.
>
> Tweet this

"As a Catholic myself, I have a personal investment in ending this consistent pattern of anti-Catholic policies and actions," Vance wrote. "But even non-Catholics and nonreligious Americans should be alarmed."

Despite Vance's claims, his op-ed doesn't quite tell the whole story on Harris' intersection with the Catholic Church. Dating back to her time as a university student in Washington, she has been notably open to certain wings of the Church — including visits to St. Augustine, the "mother church" of Black Catholics in the nation's capital. Harris' family also has ties to Catholic education, with her sister Maya having attended Bishop O'Dowd High School in their native Oakland, California.

During her tenure as San Francisco district attorney and later as California attorney general, Harris came under fire for her decisions related to the Catholic clergy child sex abuse crisis. In 2019, she admitted to withholding documents related to abuse cases from attorneys and the media — though, she claimed, to protect the identities of victims.

Many of the abused and their attorneys criticized Harris' decision, noting that the names could be redacted as needed. In the end, "She did nothing," according to the Northern California spokesman for the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. Political experts said she was likely wary of possibly alienating certain sectors of the California Catholic electorate.

Advertisement

Moreover, on the national scale, it is spurious to argue that Harris will struggle with the "Catholic vote" due to any supposed discrimination. Though swing-state Catholics generally lean conservative, Black and Hispanic Catholics nationally are planning to vote for Harris — as they did to great effect in 2020.

Also of note is that the supposedly anti-Catholic Harris is running alongside a former Catholic in Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, who was congratulated by the Minnesota Catholic Conference upon securing the VP nomination in August.

Overall, Harris' Catholic supporters have not budged from the position that she represents Catholic values more so than Trump, which may be seen at this point as a toss-up. Both major parties are at odds with Church teaching on various issues, and even Trump's wife, Melania, has openly associated herself with the American Catholic dissensus on issues like abortion access.

On the topic of actual anti-Catholicism, it was just this week that one of Trump's own operatives falsely maligned a group of progressive nuns for voter fraud. (He apparently did not know that women religious often live — and early vote — in large numbers from a single address.) Vance and Trump have also spent much of the past month vilifying and threatening Ohio's Haitians, one of the most Catholic demographics in Black America.

As such, it remains to be seen which of the two major party candidates is committed to a genuinely positive stance toward U.S. Catholics and their Church's beliefs, which often do not cleanly intersect. Until Nov. 5, though, it's likely that a certain convenient tune will continue to ring out from the GOP.

This reporting is supported by Ethnic Media Services' Stop the Hate Initiative, with funding provided by the State of California, administered by the California State Library in partnership with the California Department of Social Services and the California Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander American Affairs. To report a hate incident or hate crime and get support, go to cavshate.org. The views expressed on this website do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the CSL, CAPIAA, or the California government.

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