News



Defense secretary nominee Pete Hegseth speaks with the media as he departs a meeting on Capitol Hill Nov. 21 in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Nathan Howard)

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Amid controversy over religious-themed tattoos sported by President-elect Donald Trump's pick for defense secretary Pete Hegseth, a U.S. office of a Vatican lay institution for the church in the Holy Land has expressed concern regarding the misuse of its historic insignia beyond strictly religious purposes.

The Jerusalem Cross and the phrase "Deus [Io] vult" (Latin for "God wills"), the elements of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, are symbols for an organization that "is set up to be a … visible presence of Christ and the people of Christ in the Holy Land," and "of peace … of loving thy neighbor as thyself," Deacon John Heyer, executive director of the order's Eastern Lieutenancy, told OSV News Nov. 21.

The order — a lay institution under the protection of the Holy See with an estimated 30,000 members in close to 40 countries — aids the work of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, especially through efforts connected to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which encompasses Cyprus and Jordan as well.

But the Jerusalem Cross (a square cross inset with four smaller crosses) and particularly the Latin phrase that comprise the order's insignia have drawn intense media scrutiny, as Hegseth — an evangelical Christian — has them tattooed on his chest and arm respectively.



Knights and ladies of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem are pictured at Lake Itasca Region Pioneers Farm, May 19 in Shevlin, Minnesota. The Equestian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem has responded to public speculation about tattoos with the order's symbols worn by Pete Hegseth, U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for defense secretary, amid accusations that the symbols may represent Christian nationalism. (OSV News/Courtney Meyer)

Hegseth, a 44-year-old combat veteran and former Fox News host, is among Trump's more controversial nominees, as he has also been accused of sexual assault stemming from a 2017 incident he claimed was consensual, although he later paid the unnamed woman as part of a 2020 nondisclosure agreement.

The "Deus vult" tattoo prompted Hegseth's fellow National Guardsman Sgt. DeRicko Gaither to flag Hegseth as a possible "insider threat" during President Joe Biden's inauguration. In a 2021 email to Maj. Gen. William Walker ahead of the event — days after the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol — Gaither described the image as "quite disturbing," since the phrase "is associated with Supremacist groups," both white

and Christian. Army policy bars members from having tattoos deemed extremist, indecent, sexist or racist.

Several experts have cited the use of "Deus vult" by extremist groups. The phrase — attributed to Pope Urban II ahead of the First Crusade in 1095, which sought to regain Christian control of the Holy Land from Muslim rule — has become an online hashtag, and has also appeared in anti-Muslim graffiti, with two Arkansas mosques defaced in 2016 with the text.

OSV News reached out to Hegseth through the press office of the Trump-Vance transition team but did not immediately receive a response.

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On Nov. 20, Deacon Heyer's New York-based office issued a press release, noting the controversy over Hegseth's tattoos and stressing the order's political neutrality. While acknowledging that reports have asserted its symbols "have been embraced by what have been described as Christian and white nationalists," it did not accuse the defense secretary nominee of espousing those views.

"The Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem is a non-partisan Catholic organization under the direct protection of the Holy See and as such does not express partisan political opinions on the qualifications or associations of the cabinet nominee, who is not a member of the order," said the release.

Heyer's office also clarified in its statement that "in today's context, 'Deus vult' or 'Deus lo vult' (God wills) — once used to rally crusader knights in the Middle Ages to reclaim the Christian places in the Holy Land — reminds believers God alone has dominion over all, and commands us to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' "



The Equestian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem has responded to public speculation about tattoos with the order's symbols worn by Pete Hegseth, U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for defense secretary, amid accusations that the symbols may represent Christian nationalism. (OSV News/Courtesy of Eastern Lieutenancy)

The Jerusalem Cross itself "has been part of Christian iconography for more than a millennium and has been an inspiration to Christian pilgrims who no longer see it as a banner for crusades and war but of the passion and death of Jesus and his empty tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem," said the release, adding, "For centuries, Christian pilgrims from around the world have had the Jerusalem Cross inked on their skin as an indelible reminder of their pilgrimage to the Holy City and of their faith in Christ."

The symbolically rich image, with five crosses corresponding to the five wounds of Christ, "is particularly important as it reminds Christians of Jesus' sacrifice to die for

the salvation of the entire world, so that we 'may have life and have it abundantly,'" said the order in its release, quoting John 10:10.

Heyer told OSV News he has seen "there are groups that have taken over this symbol … or rather are using the symbol in a way that is evocative of what they consider a Christian crusade to be."

"You often have to look at what is the motivation," he added. "Are we using the church, are we using the faith to justify our political aspirations, or is our faith informing our decisions? Two very different things."

The Jerusalem Cross is also the emblem of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and in the press release, Heyer's office highlighted the widespread use throughout Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

The cross "is really meant to be not a symbol of war at all, but really a symbol of the sacrifice of Christ as well as his Gospel message of love," Heyer told OSV News. "And so anything that goes beyond that is in strict contradiction … to the Gospel and to what that symbol represents."

As of Nov. 21, it was not yet clear whether Hegseth would earn the requisite number of votes to be confirmed to the position by the U.S. Senate should he undergo a confirmation hearing in January. Republicans will have a 53-47 majority in the new Senate as of January, meaning each of Trump's nominees could only afford to lose three Republican votes — with Vice President-elect JD Vance's tiebreaking vote — without earning any Democratic support.

Several Pentagon officials have also questioned whether Hegseth's resume shows enough experience for the role.