Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis listens to a young person during a meeting with university students at the Catholic University of Portugal Aug. 3, 2023 in Lisbon. (CNS/Vatican Media)



Joshua J. McElwee

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Pope Francis is not expected to veto President Donald Trump's choice of a high-profile critic of his papacy as the next U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, according to two senior Vatican officials, despite misgivings about his stance on many issues.

Brian Burch, who leads a right-wing advocacy group, has said the pope's pastoral agenda, such as being more welcoming of LGBTQ Catholics, was causing "massive confusion" for the world's 1.4 billion Catholics.

Trump nominated Burch for the Vatican role in December. At the time, Austen Ivereigh, a papal advisor who co-authored a book with Francis in 2020, said the Vatican had "every right" to refuse to accredit Burch as ambassador.

The two Vatican officials, speaking to Reuters on background on a matter still under discussion, said Francis, who may need to appoint a new Vatican ambassador to the U.S. during Trump's four-year term, wanted to avoid a diplomatic scuffle and was not planning to veto the appointment.

Burch, whose Senate confirmation hearing has not yet been scheduled, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.
At the time of his nomination, Burch said on X: "I am committed to working with leaders inside the Vatican and the new administration to promote the dignity of all people and the common good."

Francis, leader of the global Church since 2013, is usually careful about engaging in political debates.

But he has been sharply critical of some of the president's priorities, such as plans to deport millions of undocumented immigrants. On the eve of Trump's inauguration, the pope called the deportation program a "disgrace".

Burch has been part of CatholicVote since 2005. In 2023, he sharply criticized the pope's decision to allow priests to give blessings to same-sex couples, and said a

future pope would need to "clarify" some of Francis' teachings.

Burch also accused the pope of governing the Church with a "pattern of vindictiveness," following Francis' 2023 decision to remove a Catholic bishop in Texas who had taken to posting right-wing material and conspiracy theories on social media.

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NOMINATION QUESTIONED

Two former U.S. ambassadors to the Vatican told Reuters that Burch might have a difficult time making inroads among Vatican officials, given his criticism of the pope.

"People in the Vatican, they read the news," said Ken Hackett, who served as President Barack Obama's ambassador from 2013-2017. "They don't like getting dissed or having negative things said about them or about the Holy Father."

Francis Rooney, President George W. Bush's ambassador from 2005-2008, said Vatican officials consider their relationship with the U.S. administration very important, but are cautious about interacting with papal critics.

"If the kitchen gets too hot on some of these issues publicly, that would certainly make (Vatican officials) draw back," said Rooney, a former Republican congressman. "The one person they're not going to get crosswise with is the pope."

CatholicVote is known for being closely allied with Republican politics.

In 2020, the group sent a guide to voters in swing states, describing Trump as aligned with Catholic teaching on issues such as abortion, religious freedom and healthcare. The guide did not mention Francis' criticisms of Trump.

CatholicVote also collected data from people's cellphones as they attended Mass. The practice, called "geofencing," allowed the group to identify potential Catholic voters, and send them political ads favoring Trump, raising ethical concerns.

Rev. Tom Reese, a U.S. Jesuit priest and commentator, said the Vatican expected ambassadors to push their country's agenda.

"He's a lobbyist for the U.S. government in the Vatican," Reese said of Burch's future role. "But ... a lobbyist who's obnoxious is not going to accomplish much."