Opinion
NCR Voices



JD Vance takes the oath of office with his hand on a Bible that once belonged to his great-grandmother and is held by his wife, Usha Vance, as he is sworn in as vice president of the United States during inauguration ceremonies in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol Jan. 20, 2025, in Washington. (OSV News/Chip Somodevilla, Pool via Reuters)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Vice President JD Vance's comment to Sean Hannity about the hierarchy of love demonstrated why he and other prominent converts to Catholicism are so problematic. Vance told Hannity he was invoking "a very old school, and I think it's a very Christian concept by the way, that you love your family and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then after that, prioritize the rest of the world."

What followed was a window into the way so much of contemporary Christian life is deranged. Rory Stewart, a former aide to British Prime Minister Tony Blair who now teaches at Yale, tweeted, "A bizarre take on John 15:12-13 — less Christian and more pagan tribal. We should start worrying when politicians become theologians, assume to speak for Jesus, and tell us in which order to love ..."

> A bizarre take on John 15:12-13 - less Christian and more pagan tribal. We should start worrying when politicians become theologians, assume to speak for Jesus, and tell us in which order to love… https://t.co/rrsivzGdvT
>
> — Rory Stewart (@RoryStewartUK) January 30, 2025

Vance replied with a tweet that began, "Just google 'ordo amoris' " — as if theology can be mastered via a Google search.

Vance's tweet continued, "Aside from that, the idea that there isn't a hierarchy of obligations violates basic common sense. Does Rory really think his moral duties to his own children are the same as his duties to a stranger who lives thousands of miles away? Does anyone?"

> Just google “ordo amoris.” Aside from that, the idea that there isn’t a hierarchy of obligations violates basic common sense. Does Rory really think his moral duties to his own children are the same as his duties to a stranger who lives thousands of miles away? Does anyone? https://t.co/otvv5g1wFN
>
> — JD Vance (@JDVance) January 30, 2025

As many people pointed out, the parable of the good Samaritan, as well as the instructions in Matthew 25 and a host of other Scripture verses, does think moral duties to strangers, while not "the same" as those to one's own children, are nonetheless clamant. Jesuit Fr. Jim Martin's tweet is an example of this kind of response on X, formerly Twitter.

> I’ve noticed some pushback for commenting on Jesus’s Parable of the Good Samaritan and how it asks us to care for the stranger. Some people have pointed to St. Thomas Aquinas’s traditional “ordo amoris," or order of love, to say that we should take care of our family first, then… pic.twitter.com/vcvVaWN7mP
>
> — James Martin, SJ (@JamesMartinSJ) February 1, 2025

As much as I get a kick out of Catholics throwing scriptural verses at each other — which wouldn't have happened before Vatican II! — the exchanges demonstrate the way Catholics on both sides of the ideological divide make a fundamental flaw when applying scriptural edicts to the church today. They forget the profound observation made by H. Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture*: "A great and powerful church cannot responsibly do what a small and persecuted sect found to be required of it."

Still, my problem with Vance is different and deeper. My problem is the way Vance, like a series of prominent conservative converts to Catholicism, reduces Catholicism not just to ethics, but to an ideology.

NCR first reported on the phenomenon of conservative converts to Catholicism in 2003, when Joe Feuerherd wrote about Opus Dei Fr. John McCloskey and his ministry at the Catholic Information Center in Washington, D.C. The priest had played a role in the conversions of federal appeals court Judge Robert Bork, Republican Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas, and "Crossfire" cohost Robert Novak.

When Feuerherd asked the priest why he was so successful getting them to swim the Tiber near the Potomac, he replied, "It's just like the brokerage business or any business of sales. You get a reputation, you deal with one person and they mention you to another person ... and all of a sudden you have a string of people."

Let us set aside that evangelization is not "just like the brokerage business." What became obvious over the years is that these men, and it was almost always men, recognized in the Catholic faith something solid and lasting. They came from religious traditions that lacked the breadth and depth of the Catholic intellectual tradition, and when they encountered that Catholic intellectual tradition, they were hooked.

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But if you embrace the intellectual tradition as a congeries of ideas, ignoring the Catholic culture that brought it to birth, you don't have the faith. You only have a few untethered ideas that can too easily be put to political and ideological purposes.

These conservative converts, and some of their progressive opponents, fail to realize that the essence of Catholicism is not an idea. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in the opening of his programmatic 2005 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: "*We have come to believe in God's love*: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. ... Since God has first loved us (cf. *1 Jn* 4:10), love is now no longer a mere 'command'; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us."

You can't rip the idea of an "ordo amoris" from a way of living rooted in the recognition that "being Christian ... is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us." Only if we start with gratitude and grace, can we generate a

genuinely Catholic culture.

Vance, and the policies he is defending, does not start with grace and gratitude. He is not just ethically wrong. He doesn't understand the faith to which he converted.

He is not alone. Cradle Catholics are no longer raised in a vibrant Catholic culture. They also can end up reducing the faith to a politicized ideology. Theirs is a story of religious decline in the face of secularization and consumerism, and it is a well-known, prosaic story. The story of conservative, powerful converts is richer because it is so farcical. Vance's comments about the "ordo amoris" make as much sense, morally and intellectually, as the plotline in "The Importance of Being Earnest."

Oscar Wilde, of course, wrote a comedy. Vance is writing a tragedy.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.