Vatican

View from the Vatican



JD Vance is sworn in as vice president by Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh as Usha Vance holds the Bible during the 60th presidential inauguration in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol Jan. 20 in Washington. (OSV News/Julia Demaree Nikhinson, Pool via Reuters)



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En route to Marseille, France, to headline a September 2023 migration conference, Pope Francis was speaking to reporters when he offered unsolicited praise for El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz and his strong support of migrants and refugees.

It wasn't the first time he had singled out the Texas border bishop. "I do not know if he is conservative, or if he is progressive, if he is of the right or of the left, but he is a good pastor," remarked the pope in a December 2022 interview.

Since the beginning of his papacy in 2013, there's been a recurring accusation that Francis fails to understand the United States. While he may not regularly break bread with American neoconservatives that way the past two popes were known to do, it's an unfair and inaccurate charge to levy against history's first pope from the Global South.

Francis's knowledge is informed by regular conversations he has with U.S. prelates who are frequent visitors to Rome and by meetings he convenes with groups like the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation who have met with the pope the last three years for free-ranging conversations on the situation of migrants and U.S. political life.

And to top it off, according to his public calendar, Francis meets every Saturday morning with Chicago-born Cardinal Robert Prevost, who advises the pope on bishops' appointments around the world. Surely, he receives ample information from the U.S. from these figures.

Given this context, it's not exactly surprising that following the election of a U.S. president who has pledged to deport millions of undocumented migrants, the pope might have a few things to say.



Pope Francis speaks to visitors in Spanish during his general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall Feb. 12 at the Vatican. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

After all, this is a pontiff who chose to visit the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa on his very first trip outside of Rome following his election as pope to pay tribute to the lives of migrants lost at sea and spotlight the "globalization of indifference" towards their plight.

So this week, on Feb. 11, when the Vatican published a letter from the pope to U.S. bishops warning that Trump's mass deportations plans would "end badly" and rejecting the administration's characterization of migrants as criminals, no one should have been shocked by Francis' concerns.

According to one senior Vatican official who spoke on the condition of anonymity, the pope has closely followed the response of U.S. prelates to Trump's attacks on migrants and he expects them to offer a united front in opposing any mass deportation efforts.

What is novel about this latest papal correspondence, however, is the manner in which the pope directly responded to a recent effort by Vice President JD Vance to use Catholic theology to justify the Trump administration's immigration crackdown.

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Vance, who converted to Catholicism in 2019, invoked the ancient theological concept of *ordo amoris* to argue in a Fox News interview and later on social media platform X 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, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world."

The pope didn't buy it.

"Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups," Francis wrote in his letter to U.S. bishops. "The true *ordo amoris* that must be promoted is that which we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' that is, by meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception."

The Vatican-White House exchange is nearly unprecedented in modern history.

Catholic theologian Massimo Faggioli and author of the recently published book *From God to Trump: Catholic Crisis and American Politics*, told me "it's very shocking to see the pope disavowing what a Catholic vice president has said in an interview."

While culture wars have always raged when it comes to questions of marriage and family, Faggioli said what's new about this current moment is Vance's choice to directly use Roman Catholic theology to push the White House's agenda.

What may have once been a political conflict, has escalated into a theological one.



Pope Francis greets Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and head of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican on April 18, 2024. The pope usually meets with the conference's officers twice each year. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The eminent Italian church historian Alberto Melloni told me that Francis, in writing this letter to the American bishops, is using a similar tool to Pope Pius XI, when he condemned the Action Française in the 1920s — a nationalist French political movement buttressed by many of the country's Catholics.

"If Trump believes that right-wing Catholics are a Trumpian Catholic Church, the pope of Rome tells him 'go ahead, make my day,' " said Melloni of Francis' letter.

Faggioli concurred with Melloni's assessment, but offered another parallel: Pope Leo XIII's 1899 letter, *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* ("Witness to our Good Will"), warning U.S. Catholics of the dangers of "Americanism" — particularly expressed through an overzealous attachment to individual liberty.

"Right now this is something similar, but it's more interesting," Faggioli said. "Now Pope Francis is basically asking U.S. Catholics to remember what America is about. And that's an interesting twist of history."

While Francis — and recent popes — have penned letters addressed to particular bishops' conferences and countries, the scope of those letters have been markedly different. In 2018, Francis wrote to the Chilean bishops to address the mounting clergy abuse crisis in that country and, in 2024, Francis wrote to Catholics in Nicaragua to express his closeness as they endured religious persecution.

Yet in his latest letter, the pope is expressly concerned with what it means to be Catholic. According to Faggioli, it is an effort to safeguard that identity and ensure that the church's theology isn't perverted.

"The pope has ramped up the confrontation," he said. "And here we have two moral views of the world that are clearly colliding."

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