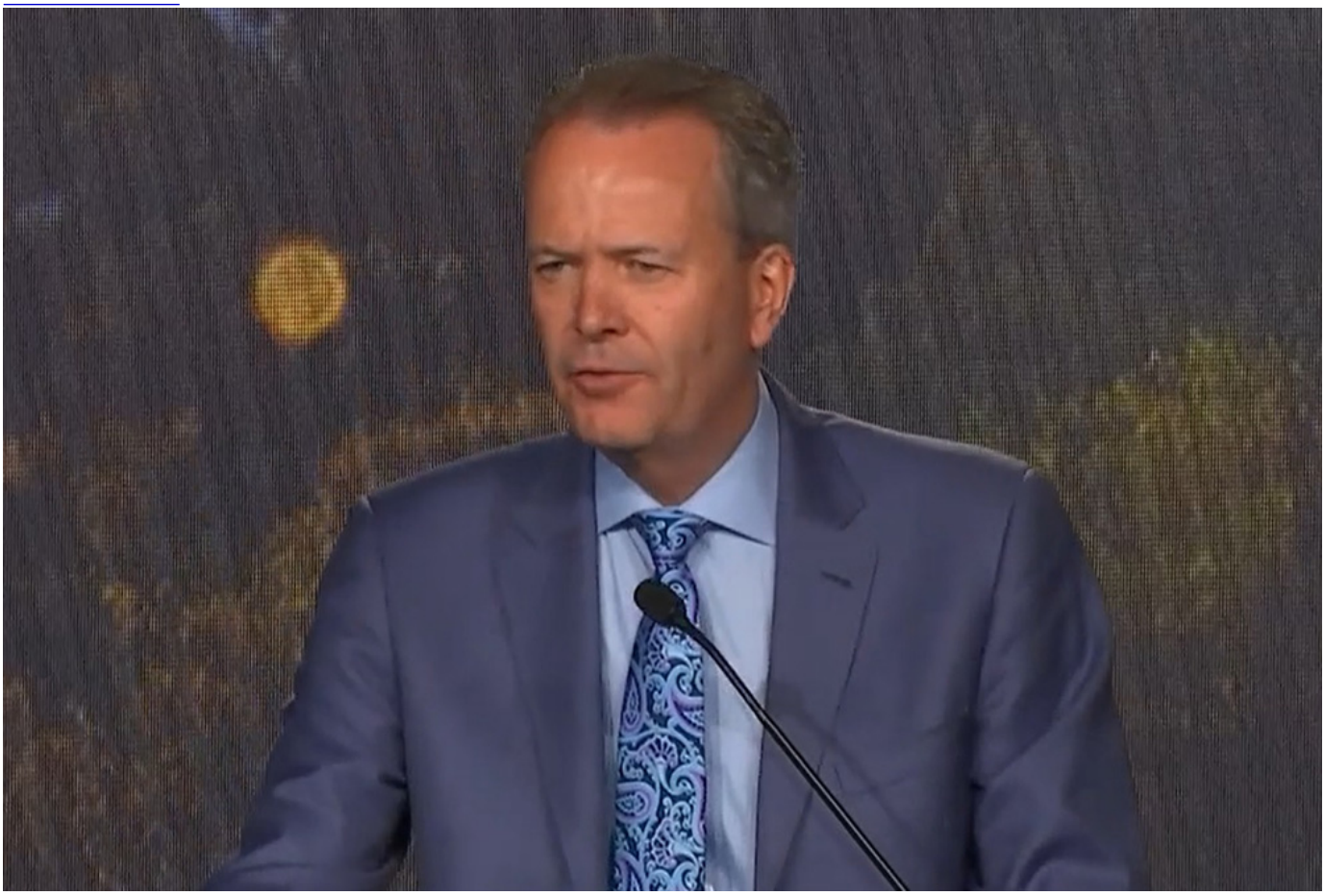
Opinion
NCR Voices



Napa Institute co-founder Timothy Busch speaks during Napa's annual summer conference in 2021. About 700 people gathered in person for the event at Busch's Meritage Resort and Spa in Napa, California, with thousands more watching online. (NCR screenshot)



by John Grosso

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Tim Busch, the California lawyer and businessman who champions conservative Catholic causes, has written an essay proclaiming the Trump administration to be the "most Christian he's ever seen."



(NCR graphic/Angie Von Slaughter)

Co-founder of the Napa Institute, known for engaging in culture war issues such as opposing abortion, criticizing LGBTQ rights and condemning modern secularism, Busch wrote an 800-word article published in the National Catholic Register titled, "The Trump Administration: More Catholic Than You Know."

NCR digital editor John Grosso reviewed Busch's article line by line to fact-check, analyze and comment. The article is below, in bold, with critical passages underlined. NCR's analysis is italicized.

Busch: The Trump Administration: More Catholic Than You Know

COMMENTARY: From what I've seen, the president's team is earnestly striving to apply the precepts of our faith to the policies that govern America.

Thirteen. That's how many presidents have served this country in my lifetime. I remember almost all of them — all but Dwight Eisenhower, who occupied the Oval Office when I was born.

From a young age, I was interested in how each president approached faith. Did they practice what they preached? Did their policies broadly reflect Christian teaching? These are the questions I've asked myself.

Now I have a surprising answer. Donald Trump's administration is the most Christian I've ever seen.

Please, don't misunderstand me. I'm not denigrating the faith of any of his predecessors, many of whom were famous for their Christianity. I think, for instance, of Jimmy Carter calling himself a "born-again Christian," and George W. Bush pursuing "compassionate conservatism" out of his Christian convictions.

Nor am I saying that Donald Trump is a model of Christian charity. While the assassination attempt against his life last year seemed to make him more aware of God, I have no way of gauging the nature or depth of his faith.

NCR: Busch is arguing that Trump, a nondenominational Christian in his third marriage and not known to attend any religious services regularly, has a more Christian administration than John F. Kennedy Jr. (a Catholic), Jimmy Carter (often called the world's most famous Sunday School teacher) and Joe Biden (who attended Mass weekly and on holy days, and was known to carry a rosary).

What I am saying is that Donald Trump has surrounded himself with a large number of strong Christian — especially strong Catholic — people. His vice president, JD Vance, may very well be the most articulate Catholic politician in the modern world.

Perhaps Busch means to say Donald Trump has surrounded himself with a large

number of Christians that agree with Busch.

JD Vance is surely not the most articulate Catholic politician in the modern world. The pope made sure we knew that in his condemnation of the vice president's dubious theology.

Biden on church steps

Then-U.S. President Joe Biden smiles after attending Mass at St. Edmond Catholic Church in Rehoboth Beach, Del., Jan. 21, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Ken Cedeno)

His cabinet is more than one-third Catholic, and more importantly, there are serious Catholics who follow what the Church teaches and earnestly try to understand the faith and apply it to governing. I think of Sean Duffy, who has nine kids, and Marco Rubio, who has spoken at length about how Catholic social teaching shapes his approach to policy.

Then there's the president's senior staff, who are mostly outside the limelight. I've had the privilege to meet and work with many of them over the years, and suffice it to say, a large number are Catholics and Christians who take their faith seriously. Some staff members are returning from the first Trump administration, when a Catholic priest in Washington, D.C., celebrated Mass for many of them in the White House itself back then. Others are new, bringing a burst of fresh energy and ideas to Trump's second term.

Biden rarely missed his Sunday obligation and attended Mass wherever he was, including at Holy Trinity in Georgetown for the Saturday evening vigil Mass, according to pool reports.

And Biden frequently invited a Catholic priest from the Washington Archdiocese to say Mass for him and his family at the White House when he was unable to meet his obligation on Sunday or holy days, according to someone familiar with the arrangement.

If Catholic social teaching was actually important to Secretary of State Rubio, why has he overseen the gutting of USAID, imperiling the lives of millions around the

globe, without a shred of remorse? The option for the poor and vulnerable is a core tenet of Catholic social teaching. Has Rubio simply ignored that because it's incompatible with the Trump-Musk agenda?

Sean Duffy — who is on the record as supporting Trump's 2017 Muslim ban and denying climate change — is the paragon of Christian virtue because he has nine children?

And here's a topic for a panel discussion at the next Napa Institute gathering: Trump, senior adviser Elon Musk, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. have fathered 30-plus children with more than 12 women.

Busch's laudatory assessment doesn't even hold up when judging by the standards of the Napa Institute's brand of Catholicism.

Migrants walk away from plane,

Guatemalan migrants deported from the U.S. under President Donald Trump's administration arrive at La Aurora Air Force Base in Guatemala City Jan. 27 on a flight from the U.S. (OSV News/Reuters/Cristina Chiquin)

Crucially, from what I've seen, the president's team is earnestly striving to apply the precepts of our faith to the policies that govern America, while faithfully advancing his goals. While naysayers claim that they're "Christian nationalists" who effectively want to convert Americans at the point of a sword, the truth is that they're starting from Christian principles that apply to all people at all times.

Let's consider some of those policies to govern America:

- *Mass firings that a federal judge said was based on a lie*
- *Multibillion-dollar cuts to foreign and domestic aid — delivering near-lethal blows to Catholic organizations that feed the starving, house the homeless and protect the vulnerable*
- *Threats of mass deportations and detention*
- *Degradation of the environment that the current pope and his predecessor called on the world to protect*

Are the Christian principles in the room with us now? In truth, the president's team is applying the precepts of the faith that Busch and his institute find important — not those that Jesus says are important.

This administration is protecting unborn life to a significant extent. It's also advancing the reality of a person's biological sex through a wide variety of policy decisions. It's restoring subsidiarity, which holds that problems should be solved as locally as possible, by dialing back decades of federal control over states and the economy. It's protecting American sovereignty, which Pope St. John Paul II rightly said is "fundamental" to society. And yes, the Trump administration is unabashedly patriotic, which St. John Paul II told us is also natural and necessary.

Busch's reference to subsidiarity is disingenuous and bastardizes the concept.

Subsidiarity is a core tenet of Catholic social teaching, which essentially states that when addressing a problem, intervention should occur on the smallest or most local level possible. The logic for this is sound — generally that the people closest to the problem have the best understanding of it and what they need to solve it.

Some problems, though, are so complex, pervasive, or resource-dependent that they cannot be dealt with by small communities, or even countries. Those problems require intervention from larger institutions, who are also tasked with resourcing and empowering smaller organizations in a way that is not oppressive or restrictive but instead helps address the common good.

Until the Trump administration gutted USAID, this was precisely how Catholic Relief Services functioned in their work abroad.

Busch is cynically using subsidiarity to rationalize Trump's anti-Christian foreign policy and to excuse the abandonment of the homeless, starving and hopeless of the world.

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On foreign policy, the Trump administration is an unabashed advocate for international religious liberty. Look no further than JD Vance's speech in Munich, in which he excoriated the U.K. for punishing a man who prayed

outside an abortion facility.

While many Catholics have concerns about the President's approach to countries like Ukraine, it's hard to say what does and doesn't align with Catholic teaching. Foreign policy tends to have more tough decisions and murky gray areas, making it harder to discern the Christian approach and take prudent action to advance it. That said, peace is absolutely a Christian goal, as Pope Francis and his predecessors have said many times. If nothing else, President Trump deserves praise for pursuing peace.

Busch cites the dark and widely criticized speech that Vance gave in Munich on Valentine's Day. Vance tore into European leaders on a number of issues, but one would hardly call him the champion of liberty when he spent the majority of the speech comparing the recent acts of democratically elected politicians to the despots who ran the countries of the Eastern bloc during the Cold War.

Another principle of Catholic social teaching, solidarity, points to the Catholic responsibility to love our neighbor and to pursue peace and justice throughout the world. The Trump administration's dramatic aid cuts and foreign policy instability fly in the face of that.

Is the Trump administration perfectly aligned with Catholic teaching? Hardly. The president's support for IVF is a huge moral problem. His rhetoric toward immigrants shows a lack of charity, though his immigration policies so far have aligned with the Church's longstanding understanding of national sovereignty and the duties owed to citizens. The administration is also in its early days, so future policies could majorly depart from the trajectory. A lot could happen in the next four years.

Busch illogically twists Catholic teaching into a pretzel to justify Trump's abhorrent immigration policy as "aligned" in any way with church teaching. (This is not the first time that Busch has co-opted the words of the Holy Father to suit his political agenda). Pope Francis made it crystal clear in his unprecedented letter to the U.S. bishops.

Yes, the pope does say in his letter to the bishops that a nation has the right to defend itself and keep communities safe; but Busch conveniently ignores the very

next sentence: "That said, the act of deporting people who in many cases have left their own land for reasons of extreme poverty, insecurity, exploitation, persecution or serious deterioration of the environment, damages the dignity of many men and women, and of entire families, and places them in a state of particular vulnerability and defenselessness."

A more honest assessment of the pope's views have been articulated by the incoming archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Robert McElroy, who noted that sovereignty and borders are important, but that is no excuse for a "war of fear and terror" on immigrants.

Trump's immigration policies do not align with church teaching, and saying so here is false.

Related: Tim Busch: A force for Catholic division now seeks unity — or does he?

No doubt, there are many who think that Trump's policies are un-Christian in the extreme. But I believe that says more about them and the corrupting nature of modern society and ideology. In the broader culture — and even in parts of the Catholic Church — faith has become synonymous with an all-powerful government that tries to do everything but does nothing well.

Christianity doesn't mean trapping people on welfare, nor does it mean destroying a nation's borders. In reality, Christianity requires difficult and prudential decisions about how best to promote the common good and protect the human person.

Charitably, Busch needs a refresher on the New Testament, because this statement is fundamentally incompatible with the Jesus of the Gospels. Of course Christinaity doesn't mean trapping people on welfare; nobody's advocating for that. Busch, however, is labeling the administration Christian while it does the opposite of what the Gospel teaches.

Is cutting 83% of USAID programs in just six weeks — leading to the possibility that millions will suffer hunger, disease, human trafficking, or death across the world — protecting human dignity? Is neutering childhood cancer research or study into diseases like HIV or malaria preserving the common good? Is denying proven science and spreading misinformation about vaccines good for protecting children?

In Jesus' famous parable of the good Samaritan, the titular character finds a beaten man on the side of the road, cares for his wounds, brings him to an inn, and then pays the innkeeper to watch over the man as he recovered — promising even more if needed. The good Samaritan gave extravagantly, unapologetically, without prudence or forethought.

There is no nuance to Christian giving: We are called to give until it hurts, to sacrifice for one another. The Trump administration has gone to great lengths to do exactly the opposite — betraying the Christian imperative to protect the dignity of the human person and promote the common good. How Busch can make the opposite point as a faithful Christian is disingenuous and obtuse at best, and straight farcical at worst. It is a betrayal of the Gospel and a source of grave scandal to wrap partisan political ideology in the mantle of faith.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** and **Digital Dunces** feature series.