News



The White House X account posted this A-I generated image of U.S. President Donald Trump posing in papal regalia. (NCR screenshot/White House X account)



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U.S. President Donald Trump is facing a firestorm of criticism from leaders of the Roman Catholic Church after posting on social media a computer-generated image of himself as pope in full papal regalia as Catholics worldwide continue to mourn Pope Francis.

At least one U.S. bishop said Trump needs to apologize, and even his closest prelate in the church, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, said it was "not good."

The image was posted on Trump's official X accounts — one from the White House and one from his personal account. They were posted just after 5 a.m. on May 3, days after Trump told reporters in Washington, "I'd like to be pope. That would be my No. 1 choice."



No comment on the Trump tweet from Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, in Rome on May 4, 2025. He was saying Mass today at Santa Maria delle Grazie, his

titular church.(NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Trump made the comment with a straight face and then endorsed his friend Dolan. Supporters said he was joking.

On May 3, after the tweet was posted, Vice President JD Vance, a Catholic, dismissed the controversy about the image of Trump dressed in white as a joke.

The White House did not respond to an email seeking comment. Asked about the criticism, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told the Associated Press, "President Trump flew to Italy to pay his respects for Pope Francis and attend his funeral, and he has been a staunch champion for Catholics and religious liberty."

Cardinal Joseph Tobin, the archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, considered the top American contender for pope, would not discuss the Pope Trump image as he was entering Santa Maria delle Grazie to say Mass. National Catholic Reporter asked his response, and he said, "It's not worth commenting on."

On social media, Bishop Thomas Paprocki, of the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois, said Trump owes an apology to Catholics.

"This is deeply offensive to Catholics especially during this sacred time that we are still mourning the death of Pope Francis and praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the election of our new Pope," Paprocki wrote.

Paprocki quoted a Bible verse from Galatians that admonishes, "God is not mocked." He said, "By publishing a picture of himself masquerading as the Pope, President Trump mocks God, the Catholic Church, and the Papacy."

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The New York State Catholic Conference said on X there is "nothing clever or funny about this image, Mr. President. We just buried our beloved Pope Francis and the cardinals are about to enter a solemn conclave to elect a new successor of St. Peter. Do not mock us."

In Rome, Dolan, the archbishop of New York, was stopped by reporters and asked about it. "I hope he didn’t have anything to do with that," Dolan said in a video

posted on social media by a multimedia journalist for the New York Archdiocese.

"Are you offended by that?" a journalist asked.

Dolan paused and replied, "It wasn't good." He repeated that in Italian for Roman journalists and laughed nervously.

There appeared to be no comment from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on May 3. In fact, those in the Catholic hierarchy appear reticent to mention the AI image at all, despite its social media virality. As of the morning of May 4, only a select few bishops had addressed the image directly.

The White House tweet was posted just after 5 a.m. on May 3, 2025.

Despite silence from the hierarchy, prominent Catholics have taken to social media to condemn the image.

Jesuit Fr. James Martin, a priest and columnist based in New York, said on social media, "Jesuits are always supposed to give people the benefit of the doubt. So even though I find this deeply offensive, I will presume that Mr. Trump meant this light-heartedly (even though he had just recently returned from Pope Francis's Funeral Mass, and he has a Catholic Vice President who met with Francis the day before his death)."

Then Martin said that Trump gets special treatment with his behavior. "But imagine the incandescent outrage, the swift condemnation, and the individual and joint protests from the US bishops if this had been done by Joe Biden or Barack Obama."

Bishop Daniel Flores

Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas (CNS/Robert Duncan)

Former Republican National Committee chairman Michael Steele, a Catholic and television commentator, raised questions about the president's competence.

"During this period of Novemdiales (mourning the loss of Pope Francis) I'll set this offense aside," said Steele, who recently attended the installation of the new archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Robert McElroy.

"More to the point, this affirms how unserious and incapable he is. At 78 he remains a 10yo child, emotionally scarred and broken while desperate to prove he could be somebody. His problem: he can’t grow up to prove it."

One bishop seemed to allude to the controversy. Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, appeared to be making a veiled reference when he wrote on X: "Just when you thought it was safe to go back to checking your timeline once in a while. Read a good book, folks, go visit an elderly relative, anything to keep the algorithms from eating your soul."

In Rome, Italians expressed confusion and dismay at the post.

"When I saw the image of Trump dressed as the pope on the news, I first laughed," Maria Giulia Pernice, a retired Italian teacher, said while in line to enter St. John's Basilica for a Jubilee visit. "Then I went online to see if it was really him who posted it or his fans."

Guido Tombarelli, a tour guide who was accompanying Pernice's group, said it seemed odd, given that Trump had just paid his respects to Francis in St. Peter's Square. "I just can't understand why it was necessary to publish that photo when just a week ago he was here in Rome for his funeral," Tombarelli said.

Camillo Barone and John Grosso contributed to this story.

This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** and **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series.