Vatican



Timothy Busch, cofounder and board chair of the Napa Institute, speaks at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City on Oct. 15, 2024. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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In the days leading up to the conclave to elect Pope Francis' successor, a bevy of wealthy American business leaders, philanthropists and conservative activists have descended on Rome and Vatican City to meet, fete and dine with cardinals and churchmen in well-heeled settings.

Some cardinals were toasted at pricy venues and $100 bottles of wine were served at gatherings that seemed more akin to American political lobbying events than contemplative prayer services for prelates preparing to pick the next pope, according to media outlets and social media posts reviewed by the National Catholic Reporter.

The festive atmosphere of the conservative gatherings was not specifically planned for the week after the death of Pope Francis. The events occurred now because the Novemdiales — the traditional nine-day mourning period that follows the death of a pope — coincided with "America Week," an annual American-led fundraising period for Catholic causes in the Eternal City featuring soirees, receptions and dinner parties at upscale hotels, palaces and venerable church settings.

American VIPs from groups such as the Papal Foundation are in Rome for their yearly post-Easter "pilgrimage" where they deliver an annual financial pledge to the Vatican. Among them are representatives from the Napa Institute, an organization that since its founding in 2010 has become a driving force to lobby for the U.S. Catholic Church to adhere to conservative values.

Napa Institute members have been in Rome for the past week and a half, attending Pope Francis' funeral on April 26 as well as Masses at the basilicas of San Clemente and St. John Lateran, according to NCR's review of social media.

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On May 4, Tim Busch, cofounder and president of the Napa Institute's board of directors, and others attended a dinner at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas

Aquinas, also known as the Angelicum or Collegio Angelico.

The Napa Institute's Facebook page indicates that the evening consisted of a campus tour, garden reception and dinner, as well as a musical performance. Bottles of Busch's Trinitas Cellars wines — which sell at a retail price of $50 to $125 each — were on hand.

Chicago-based financier Jim Perry, a Papal Foundation member and one of America's leading Catholic philanthropists who has served on the boards for conservative apostolates such as Word on Fire and Fellowship of Catholic University Students, hosted a dinner April 29 at the Basilica of San Clemente, for which he is raising funds for a $20 million restoration, The Times of London reported.

On April 30, nine days after Pope Francis died, a gathering of the Papal Foundation was held at the St. Regis Hotel in Rome. The event featured remarks from New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, a conservative-leaning prelate who will take part in the conclave, which begins May 7.

Besides joking that St. Regis' ornate ballroom was "not as nice as the Sistine Chapel," where he will soon be sequestered, The Times reported that Dolan compared the Papal Foundation's patronage of Vatican causes to the support that members of the early church gave to St. Peter.

A spokesman for Dolan did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

Last year, the Papal Foundation distributed $14.7 million in grants, scholarships, and humanitarian aid. The Times reported that the audience at St. Regis Hotel was told that the foundation intends to increase its grant-giving to $30 million annually, with an aim to raise $750 million from American philanthropists in the future.

According to the Times, one anonymous Papal Foundation VIP said, "This room could raise a billion to help the church. So long as we have the right pope."

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