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Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, processes into St. Peter's Basilica at the be

Cardinal Pietro Parolin processes into St. Peter's Basilica at the beginning of a Mass on the seventh day of mourning for Pope Francis on May 2, 2025. Parolin, a leading contender for pope, was the subject of a false report about a health emergency. Italian media blamed CatholicVote, which opposes his election to succeed Francis. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



by James V. Grimaldi

Executive Editor

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Rome — May 6, 2025

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CatholicVote, the [conservative political operation](#) run by President Trump's pick as ambassador to the Vatican, is in a war of finger-pointing with the Italian media over a fake report seemed aimed to smear a leading candidate to be pope.

The dispute arises over a false report on the CatholicVote website and elsewhere saying that Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the secretary of state under Pope Francis, had collapsed and required emergency medical attention.

The original source is unclear.

The [CatholicVote post](#) sourced Italian media. The famously scrappy Italian newspapers pushed back, saying the item first appeared on CatholicVote. All the related websites involved in the spat have been updated, making it difficult to

determine who is to blame.



Brian Burch, co-founder of CatholicVote, is pictured in an undated photo (OSV News/CatholicVote)

Regardless of the source of the fake news, the controversy comes at a particularly bad time for [CatholicVote co-founder Brian Burch](#), whose nomination to be ambassador to the Holy See is pending in the U.S. Senate. A Senate GOP-controlled committee approved the nomination, with all Democrats opposed.

CatholicVote was credited by the Trump campaign for helping to win over Catholics for the Republican candidate for president.

Though he has not been confirmed by the U.S. Senate, Burch has been in Rome this week as conservative Catholics have held lavish parties in an attempt to influence the College of Cardinals as they choose the successor to St. Peter.

After the death of Pope Francis, Parolin was seen by many as a leading contender to be the next pope. He appears on most list of papabile, those who could be pope, and has been a frontrunner by bookmakers from Vegas to London.

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[Parolin's star has fallen in recent days](#) as his homily at the Sunday Mass for youth pilgrims visiting for the Jubilee was seen as a flacid, and cardinals began discussing a charisma gap for the 70-year-old cardinal. Parolin has had minor health challenges, but nothing life-threatening.

The erroneous Parolin report, [swiftly denied](#) by Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni, said that the Italian cardinal had fainted during the Friday, May 2, General Congregation meeting of cardinals because of a spike in his blood pressure. The apparently fictitious report said Vatican medical personnel were called.

"Fake news?" asked an Italian reporter in English at the Friday Vatican media briefing. "Fake news," Bruni said. `

On Saturday, May 3, Italy's prominent Corriere della Sera [pointed the finger](#) at CatholicVote. "In this case, the broadside came from the American front," the newspaper said.

"To prove it, supporters of the cardinal emphasize that the first rumors about the episode that supposedly struck him on Wednesday came from the conservative American site CatholicVote.org (with echoes on many social media accounts)," the Italian newspaper said.

CatholicVote.org in turn blamed its error on [Virgilio Notizie](#), [Il Giornale](#) and [AGI News](#). But the links went to pages that cited CatholicVote.org as the origin of the Parolin rumor.

The biggest complaint CatholicVote has with Parolin is [one of his primary obstacles](#) to the papacy. "Critics blame him for the secret Vatican agreement with the

Communist government in China, which has turned out to be disastrous,” [CatholicVote wrote.](#)

Parolin was one of the primary architects of [the Vatican's controversial agreement](#) with China that was signed in 2018. The deal allows all bishops in China to be in communion with Rome for the first time in decades. It was Parolin who during the papacy of Benedict XVI first reestablished formal contact between the Vatican and Beijing.



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CV News Feed on May 1, 2025

Update on Cardinal Parolin reportedly suffering brief health scare at Vatican

This is a screenshot of the updated item on CatholicVote.org's website after it corrected its erroneous initial report about Cardinal Pietro Parolin. (Screenshot of CatholicVote.org)

Some China hawks, notably including [former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#), Democrat of California, have criticized the deal for giving the Chinese Community Party a say over Catholic hierarchy.

Also among the gripes that CatholicVote has with Parolin is “his role in keeping the Holy See silent against Latin American dictatorships that have oppressed the Catholic church such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela,” according to Burch’s

[conservative website.](#)

Camillo Barone contributed to this story. The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** feature series. [View the full series.](#)