Opinion
NCR Voices



President Donald Trump delivers remarks at a National Day of Prayer event, May 1, 2025, in the White House Rose Garden. (Official White House Photo/Molly Riley)



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Despite the firestorm surrounding his "Pope Trump" post, President Donald Trump said that the outrage was not from practicing Catholics offended by his actions, but instead engineered by the "fake news media."

Trump posted the computer-generated image of himself in full papal regalia on his personal Truth Social account on the evening of Friday, May 2. Soon after, the official White House accounts shared his post.

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After social media exploded in a firestorm of outrage at what many considered to be a brazen display of anti-Catholic bigotry, on Monday (May 5), reporters asked the president about the image.

"They can't take a joke," Trump said in response to a reporter's question. "You don't mean the Catholics, you mean the fake news media. Nah, the Catholics loved it."

The president isn't just lying; he's gaslighting. Millions of Catholics have expressed their deep anger at the irreverent image on social media. The post sparked a firestone of outrage from Catholics throughout the world. Many cardinals, gathered in Rome on the eve of the papal conclave to choose the Catholic Church's 267th pope, were asked about it over the weekend.

Trump could have apologized. He had the opportunity to be sincere, to acknowledge his error and move on. He could have even issued one of those "I am sorry you were offended" non-apologies. Instead, he chose the language of a bully. It was not enough to mock us; he wants to tell the world that we liked it, too.



US President Donald Trump has attracted criticism from some Catholics after posting an AI-generated image of himself as the pope. (OSV News/X, White House)

Trump has a history of sharing insensitive or falsified artificial intelligence-generated images and videos of himself on his Truth Social account. In the past, he has shared a video of him bulldozing and then building a resort in Gaza (complete with a golden statue of himself), an AI-generated Taylor Swift endorsement and a fake image of him praying.

Trump did make a half-hearted effort to distance himself from the "Pope Trump" image. "I had nothing to do with it, I don't even know where it came from. … I had nothing to do with it."

But he didn't stop there. Apropos of nothing, Trump brought up his wife Melania, who he says is a Catholic (a questionable assertion that is impossible to fact-check) to defend himself. "Actually my wife thought it was cute. She said, 'Isn't that nice?' "

The president of the United States, instead of apologizing for his bigoted social

media post, instead turned to the Catholic equivalent of the tried and true argument:

- I can't be racist, I have a friend who is a person of color.
- I can't be sexist, I have female relatives!

Being married to a Catholic (Has anyone ever seen Melania in a church that wasn't for the death of a world leader? Anyone? Anywhere? Photo? I'd take an AI-generated photo of Melania in a church.) doesn't absolve the president of bigotry. Nor does it allow him to continue a relentless assault on the church, from its charity work to its leader.

Meanwhile, the most prominent Catholics in the president's orbit have decided "it was just a joke."

"As a general rule, I'm fine with people telling jokes and not fine with people starting stupid wars that kill thousands of my countrymen," said Vice President JD Vance on X (formerly Twitter) in an exchange with The Bulwark editor Bill Kristol. The vice president's inexplicable and confusing red herring argument about war was never clarified.

When pressed about it before Mass at his titular church on Sunday (May 4), New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan offered this stirring retort: "Well, it wasn't good."

And Bishop Robert Barron, of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, having just greeted Trump warmly at the White House and now in Rome to opine about (but not participate in) the conclave, was given his opportunity to respond to the image in an interview with EWTN.

Surely, the man famous for his impassioned videos condemning the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as an anti-Catholic hate group, the Paris Olympics for their "woke duplicity," the song "Imagine" and feminism in Star Wars, would give a rousing response to the open mocking of the papacy?

Nope.

"I think it was a bad joke," said Barron with a smile, "I think it was a sophomoric

attempt at humor. I don't think at all it represents disdain for the Catholic Church or some attack on the Catholic Church. President Trump has signaled in all sorts of ways, his support for and affection for the Catholic faith."

Trump and Bishop Barron

Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minn. and director of the Word on Fire media empire, right, looks on as Paula White, senior adviser to the White House Faith Office, speaks next to U.S. President Donald Trump during the National Day of Prayer May 1, 2025, in the Rose Garden at the White House in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

Let's look at some facts.

The president destroyed the U.S. Agency for International Development, crippled Catholic Relief Services; built a deportation program so contrary to the Gospel that it prompted a papal condemnation; and just mocked the papacy.

That's your pick for a president who supports and cares for the Catholic Church? It's hard to imagine anything more offensive.

Imagine a twice divorced felon, who has been found liable for sexual assault* and anti-Catholic bigot sitting on the throne of Peter.

Let's stop and pray for the millions of people around the globe suffering at the president's hand while he mocks the faith of the bishop of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota.

When asked if the president should remove the image, Barron shrugged and chuckled.

Pretty funny. Loads of laughs.

"I'll leave it up to him. I think it has something like 97 million views. What would be the point?"

Sure, what's the point? Leave it up for all eternity.

Maybe it will last longer on the Internet than Word on Fire.

**This story has been updated to clarify that Trump has been found liable for sexual assault. Trump has been accused of rape.*

This story appears in the **Digital Dunces** and **Who will be the next pope?** feature series.