News



Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal and Palantir, offers a pair of hundred dollar bills to attendees during a keynote address at the Bitcoin Conference, April 7, 2022, in Miami Beach, Fla. (AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell, File)

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One of the hottest tickets in the Vatican's backyard these days is for a four-lecture series on the Antichrist being given by Silicon Valley tech billionaire Peter Thiel.

The invitation-only conference in Rome, from Sunday to Wednesday, has proven so controversial that the Catholic universities initially associated with it have all denied official involvement.

Thiel is a co-founder of PayPal and Palantir, the data-mining company that has been assisting the Trump administration's migrant deportation crackdown. An early donor to the political career of Vice President JD Vance, Thiel is also deeply interested in the apocalyptic concept of the Antichrist and has written and lectured on it before.

"Christians debated these prophecies for millennia. Who was the Antichrist? When would he arrive? What would he preach?" he mused in a November essay in the Catholic magazine First Things.

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Catholic institutions take their distance

Discussion of the Antichrist by a tech billionaire in the Vatican's backyard has proven divisive.

Initially, the lectures were reportedly going to be held at the Pontifical St. Thomas Aquinas University, the Dominican university in Rome known colloquially as the Angelicum. It is best known these days as the place where a young priest named Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV, wrote his canon law doctoral thesis.

But as word began to circulate in the Italian media about alleged secret lectures on the Antichrist by Thiel at the pope's alma mater, the Angelicum took its distance:

"We would like to clarify that this event is not organized by the University, will not take place at the Angelicum, and is not part of any of our institutional initiatives," the university said in a statement on its website.

According to an announcement for the event seen by The Associated Press, the lectures were "jointly organized" by an Italian organization, the Vincenzo Gioberti

Cultural Association, and the Cluny Institute at the Catholic University of America in Washington.

The Gioberti group, which describes itself as a cultural association dedicated to the renewal of Italian political culture, confirmed it was involved. The association, named for a 19th century Italian Catholic priest-philosopher, said in a statement it believed in promoting research and encounters "based on the great tradition of classical and Christian thought. We believe this heritage is fundamental to addressing the crisis engulfing the contemporary West."

But CUA distanced itself.

"The Catholic University of America is not sponsoring or hosting an event featuring Peter Thiel this month in Rome," a university spokesperson told AP. "The Cluny Project is an independent initiative incubated at the university."

The Cluny Institute is a new initiative of the CUA to bring together leaders from the worlds of academia, religion and technology. In 2023, CUA hosted Thiel at its Washington campus for a talk on René Girard, the French academic.

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> —Spokesperson for Catholic University of America
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A fascination with the Antichrist

Thiel is known to be somewhat obsessed with the Antichrist — the Biblical term used to describe someone who opposes or denies Christ — and Armageddon — the Biblical final battle between good and evil. Thiel speaks of the concepts in terms of the choices facing humanity to confront the existential risks of the world today.

The Rome lectures appear to follow the blueprint of a four-part lecture series he gave in San Francisco last September. Some of the invitations circulating in Rome, for example, copy the description of the San Francisco event.

"His remarks will be anchored on science and technology, and will comment on the theology, history, literature and politics of the Antichrist. Religious thinkers upon whom Peter will draw include René Girard, Francis Bacon, Jonathan Swift, Carl Schmitt and John Henry Newman," said one invitation.

Thiel, who co-founded PayPal in 1998, and other entrepreneurs of that era were part of a group dubbed the "PayPal Mafia," including Tesla CEO Elon Musk, Yelp CEO Jeremy Stoppelman, and YouTube co-founders Chad Hurley and Steve Chen.

After PayPal was sold to eBay in 2002 for $1.5 billion, Thiel then founded the hedge fund Clarium Capital Management and helped launch Palantir Technologies, which recently inked an agreement with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to streamline the process of identifying and deporting people the agency is targeting.

Ties to the Trump administration

Thiel was a key advisor and donor to U.S. President Donald Trump during his first administration and has retained some ties to the White House. Palantir is also one of the donors to the White House's ballroom project and David Sacks, who worked with Thiel at PayPal, is also chair of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.

Thiel is also known to be close to Vance. He poured millions of dollars into Vance's successful primary race for the U.S. Senate, from where Trump named him running mate and eventual vice president. Some see Thiel as a mentor to Vance, a Catholic convert and the most high-profile Catholic in U.S. politics.

Vance's theological justification for the Trump administration's crackdown on immigrants, based on an ancient Christian concept of the order of love, received a famous slapdown from Pope Francis just before he died.

A few months before he was elected pope, Prevost shared an article from a Catholic publication from his now dormant account on X with the headline, "JD Vance is wrong: Jesus doesn't ask us to rank our love for others."

Vance attended Leo's installation and later had an audience with him, during which he delivered a letter from Trump inviting Leo to visit.