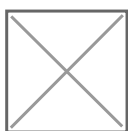




U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., speaks during the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington March 19, 2026. (OSV News/Leslie E. Kossoff)

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House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., defended the role of religion in public life during comments March 19 at the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington.

"Religion in the public sphere happens to be one of my favorite topics," Johnson, who is an evangelical Christian, said, adding, "I'm convinced it's one of the most misunderstood issues in American public life."

Citing Thomas Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists that refers to "a wall of separation between Church & State," Johnson argued some "take that phrase and they turn it around."

"Jefferson clearly did not mean at all to keep religion from influencing our government," Johnson said, arguing that "the founders wanted to protect the Church and the religious practice of citizens from an encroaching state, not the other way around."

"Our founders understood that a free society and a healthy republic depend upon religious and moral virtue; not only because these things help prevent the abuse of power, but also because those convictions make it possible to preserve our central freedom," he said.

Organizers of the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast have said the event was established in 2004 in response to St. John Paul II's call for a new evangelization.

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Retired Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, read a letter from Pope Leo XIV to the gathering. The message said, "The tradition of interceding for one's own nation goes back to biblical times when St. Paul invited the early Christians to pray in a particular way for those in positions of authority, confident that their prayer united to that of Christ would be both powerful and effective."

"It is in this confidence that today you entreat the Lord for the leaders of this beloved country," the pope's message said.

"Wherever she finds herself," the message added, "the Church seeks to carry out her mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God, making available to everyone the Lord's gifts of truth and life in order to unite all people to God."

A message from President Donald Trump, read by U.S. Domestic Policy Director Vince Haley, said, "My administration remains firmly committed to defending the right of every Catholic to worship God freely and without fear."

Offering his own comments on religious pluralism during remarks about the upcoming America 250 celebrations, Haley said that he urges his fellow Catholics to be a strong voice against "the face of rising attacks, the tidal wave of hatred that is being manufactured" against "our beloved Jewish neighbors and fellow citizens."

"Hatred toward Jewish people is ugly, despicable, an affront to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and surely an occasion of terrible grief for a Jewish mother, Mary. And such evil should be condemned loudly and often by all people of goodwill, especially us," he said.

The Anti-Defamation League, which tracks antisemitic attacks, said in a 2025 report that it recorded 9,354 antisemitic incidents across the U.S. the previous year, which marked a 344% increase over the groups' findings from the previous five years.

After the Second Vatican Council, which took place 20 years after the systematic slaughter of 6 million European Jews in the Holocaust (known in Hebrew as the Shoah) during World War II, the Catholic Church has denounced "hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone," while affirming the "spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews," in the 1965 document, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," better known by its Latin name *Nostra Aetate*.



Actor Jonathan Roumie, center, best known for his TV role as Jesus Christ in "The Chosen," talks with guests during the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington March 19, 2026. (OSV News/Leslie E. Kossoff)

House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, R-La., who is Catholic, said during the event that when he was shot and wounded in a 2017 shooting at a congressional baseball practice, he "asked God for some pretty heavy things."

"Prayer is such a powerful thing, because it's a direct conversation with God, and God is listening," he said. "If you call his name, he listens. He might not always answer the way you want, but God is listening, and God will share the burden with you. And so whatever tough times you're going into, or good times ... always lean on God and turn to prayer."

Other speakers at the event included Claire Lai, an attorney and the daughter of imprisoned media entrepreneur and pro-democracy advocate Jimmy Lai, who was convicted of national security offenses under Hong Kong's controversial national security law. She said her family appreciates the support they have received from

the U.S. and its lawmakers.

"It is our hope," Lai said, that Trump and his administration will facilitate her father's release.

The president and U.S. lawmakers have called the charges Lai has now been convicted of trumped up, arguing they are evidence the Chinese Communist Party is seeking to silence dissent.

Jonathan Roumie, the actor known for portraying Jesus Christ in the television series "The Chosen," said during the event that the role has been "a privilege," but added, "This role has never been something that I can do on my own."

"The deeper we go into the Gospels, the more I'm reminded of my dependence on this infinite grace and in a very real way, this work has become a kind of prayer for me, an invitation to return to him with greater humility," he said.

The organization bestowed its annual Christifideles Laici Award on the founders of the Hallow prayer app: CEO Alex Jones, Chief Technology Officer Erich Kerekes and co-founder Alessandro DiSanto.