Opinion
Guest Voices

Detail of an icon of St. Augustine at Christ the King Cathedral in Superior Wis. (OSV News/The Crosiers/Gene Plaisted)

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In the aftermath of U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's recent Pentagon prayer and Pope Leo XIV's Palm Sunday homily, much of the public commentary has settled into a familiar framework. A conservative official invoked God in the context of war and a supposedly liberal pope rebuked him. The exchange is then cast as a political disagreement, or at most as an instance of religion being deployed on both sides of a geopolitical conflict.

This account is inadequate. What is unfolding is not a political dispute but a theological one, and its terms are ancient, not modern. In order to understand the public dialogue taking place between Hegseth and Leo, we need to turn to St. Augustine.

To begin, it is essential to note that Hegseth's Pentagon prayer, widely circulated in recent days, is not original — either to him or to the chaplain who he claims sent it to him. It is, instead, a compilation, largely made up of verses from the Hebrew Scripture. Its language borrows most heavily, though without attribution, from what are known as the imprecatory Psalms — prayers that call for divine judgment on enemies, sometimes in violent terms.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at a news briefing at the Pentagon in Washington March 31, 2026 (OSV News/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

Hegseth began his prayer with the words: "Almighty God who trains our hands for war and our fingers for battle." This line is taken directly from Psalm 144 which begins, "Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle." When Hegseth asks God to "break the teeth of the ungodly," he is repurposing both Psalm 3:7 and Psalm 58:6, both of which refer to God "breaking the teeth of the wicked." And when he implores "Pour out your wrath upon those who plot vain things and blow them away like chaff before the wind," he is combining language from as many as five Psalms (1, 2, 35, 69 and 79) while still

managing to add the decidedly modern language of "blow [them] away." There is more, but these examples will suffice.

The imprecatory Psalms are among the most difficult texts in the Bible, which is why they have, for millenia, been interpreted by Christians through a particular theological hermeneutic. From the first century onward, the Christian tradition has not treated them as straightforward calls for vengeance. In the words of Origen of Alexandria (circa 185-circa 253) in *First Principles*, "By the history of wars, and of the victors, and the vanquished, certain mysteries are indicated to those who are able to test these statements."

For Hegseth, however, there are no mysteries, no subtleties. The enemies of the U.S. become the literal enemies of God and the psalmist's cries for divine justice become a direct authorization of extraordinary military violence.

In his *Expositions on the Psalms*, Augustine confronts the imprecatory Psalms and insists that they cannot be read as endorsements of hatred or cruelty toward other human beings for the simple reason that then they would not be from God.

"Trains our hands for battle and our fingers for war" refers, according to Augustine, to the conquering of our enemies by works of mercy and charity. And calls for God to break the enemy's teeth refer not to physical violence, but to the silencing of evil and destructive words.

Within the Christian tradition, the Psalms speak in a spiritual register not a literal one. Calls for violence do not refer to military battles or human enemies, but to the enemies inside the human soul: sin, injustice and the disordered loves that deform our will.

When the psalmist calls for destruction, Augustine reads this as the destruction of vice, not of human beings in battle. His exegesis is therefore not a "softening" of the imprecatory Psalms; it represents a robust interpretation that is grounded in Augustine's most fundamental theological claim — that God is love made visible in Christ.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine articulates this claim clearly as it applies to Scripture: "Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought."

In the Christian tradition, the violent language found in the imprecatory psalms can never be separated from Jesus' command to love one's enemies. Therefore Scripture can never, as Hegseth does, be marshaled to sanctify hatred, even when that hatred is cloaked in the language of justice or national defense. Any Christian who prays these psalms must do so with an awareness that their ultimate meaning is the transformation of the self, not the destruction of the other.

Pope Leo XIV delivers a homily during the Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, March 29, 2026. (OSV News/Remo Casilli, pool via Reuters)

Leo's Palm Sunday homily must also be read from within this Augustinian framework. His rebuke of Hegseth, which comes from the book of Isaiah, is that God

"does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them, saying: 'Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen: your hands are full of blood' " (Isaiah 1:15). Unlike Hegseth, Leo is not merely choosing passages from Scripture that support his political commitments — he is, with Augustine, interpreting all of Scripture through the same lens.

Leo's response to Hegseth is not primarily political, it is theological. He is speaking about war and violence as the Augustinian he is, drawing on a tradition that insists, without exception, on the primacy of charity and mercy in all use and interpretation of Scripture. Within the Christian tradition as formed and shaped by Augustine, any prayer that asks God to destroy one's enemies, while leaving intact the structures of hatred and violence within the self, represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of God.

The question is not whether Scripture contains violent language. It does. The question is whether that language can be invoked to sanctify and celebrate the destruction of human beings. On that point, the Christian tradition, articulated with particular clarity by Augustine, is unequivocal: Any interpretation that does not build up love of God and neighbor is not simply politically misguided. It is blasphemous.

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