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Pope Leo XIV blesses faithful as he starts his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Wednesday, April 8, 2026. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

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Donald Trump is accustomed to criticism from coast to coast — Democrats, disaffected Republicans, late-night comedians, massive protests. Yet in his second presidency, Trump’s most influential American critic doesn’t live in the country but at the Vatican.

It's an unprecedented situation, with the first American pope directly assailing the American president over the war in Iran, where a fragile ceasefire took hold this week. The announcement came after Pope Leo XIV declared that Trump's belligerence was "truly unacceptable."

Never before has the relationship between Washington and the Vatican revolved around two Americans — specifically, a 79-year-old politician from Queens and a 70-year-old pontiff from Chicago. They come from the same generation and share some common cultural roots yet bring jarringly distinct approaches to their positions of vast power. And the relationship comes with risks for both sides.

"They’re two white guy boomers but they could not be any more different in their life experiences, in their values, in the way they have chosen to live those values," said theology professor Natalia Imperatori-Lee of Fordham University. "This is a very stark contrast, and I think an inflection point for American Christianity."

Polar positions on Iran among U.S. Christians

Experts on the Catholic Church emphasized that Leo’s opposition to the war reflects established church teachings, not the reflexive politics of the moment.

"For the last five centuries, the church has been involved in a project of helping develop strong international norms," including the Geneva Conventions in recent centuries, said Catholic University professor William Barbieri. "It is a very long-standing tradition rooted in Scripture and theology and philosophy."

Yet the U.S. administration, which has close ties to conservative evangelical Protestant leaders, has claimed heavenly endorsement for Trump’s war on Iran.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth urged Americans to pray for victory "in the name of Jesus Christ." When Trump was asked whether he thought God approved of the war,

he said, "I do, because God is good — because God is good and God wants to see people taken care of."

The Rev. Franklin Graham, son of iconic Baptist evangelist Billy Graham, said of Trump that God "raised him up for such a time as this." And Graham prayed for victory so Iranians can "be set free from these Islamic lunatics."

Leo countered in his Palm Sunday message that God "does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them." He referenced an Old Testament passage from Isaiah, saying that "even though you make many prayers, I will not listen — your hands are full of blood."

While it's not unusual for popes and presidents to be at cross purposes, it's exceedingly rare for the leader of the Catholic Church to directly criticize a U.S. leader, and Leo later named Trump directly and expressed optimism that the president would seek "an off-ramp" in Iran.

An even stronger condemnation came after Trump warned of mass strikes against Iranian power plants and infrastructure, writing on social media that "an entire civilization will die tonight." Leo described that as a "threat against the entire people of Iran" and said it was "truly unacceptable."

Experts: Leo doesn’t see himself as a Trump rival

Imperatori-Lee said Leo’s direct criticism stands out from the church's more general critiques of political and social systems. For example, Pope Francis urged U.S. bishops to defend migrants without specifically mentioning Trump or his deportation agenda. Leo also previously called for humane treatment of migrants.

"Popes have critiqued unfettered capitalism before, very robustly. The popes have critiqued the Industrial Revolution, right? Things that the U.S. has been at the forefront of," Imperatori-Lee said, "but it’s never been this specific and localized."

She said Leo’s commentary resonates in the U.S. — with Catholics and non-Catholics — because he is a native English speaker.

"There’s no question about his inflection and meaning," she said. "It removes any ambiguities."

Trump welcomed Leo’s election last May as a "great honor" for the country, and he hasn't responded to the latest criticisms. The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

"What Pope Leo and Donald Trump have in common is they both lived through the post-war polarization," including the political upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War, said Steven Millies, a professor at Chicago’s Catholic Theological Union, one of the pope’s alma maters.

He noted that Leo is a subscriber to The New York Times, plays the "Wordle" game, keeps up with U.S. sports and talks regularly with his brothers, including an avowed Trump supporter.

"In some ways he’s just like us," Millies said, someone "who understands where our domestic political crisis came from," unlike the Argentinian Francis, "who did not fully understand the peculiarities of the United States" even as he offered implicit criticism.

Barbieri said Leo’s American savvy still does not change an underappreciated reality of Catholicism and the papacy. "The Catholic Church doesn’t neatly fit into either right or left boxes as they’re understood in U.S. politics," he said.

Leo’s global focus vs. Trump’s ‘transactional’ politics

Leo spent much of his pre-papal ministry, including all his time as a bishop and cardinal, outside the U.S.

He was educated in Rome as a canon lawyer within the church. He was a bishop in poor, rural swaths of Peru. He led the Augustinian order and served as Francis’ prefect for recommending bishop appointees around the world.

Imperatori-Lee said that global reach gave him a first-hand perspective on how Washington's economic and military policies — including backing dictators in Latin America — have negatively affected less powerful nations and their citizens.

His varied experiences made then-Cardinal Robert Prevost uniquely suited to be elected pope despite the College of Cardinals’ traditional skepticism toward the U.S. and its superpower status. Millies argued that Trump and his advisers, even Vice

President JD Vance, a Catholic convert, may not appreciate those distinctions.

"This is an administration that seems to think only in terms of transactional politics — who’s for us and who’s against us," he said.

Polarization poses risks for Leo and Trump

Relations between Washington and the Vatican have become so strained that a report of an allegedly contentious meeting involving Pentagon and Catholic Church officials sent shockwaves through both cities.

According to the report in The Free Press, a member of Trump's administration warned the church in January not to stand in the way of U.S. military might.

The Vatican on Friday issued a statement rejecting the report's characterization of the meeting, saying it "does not correspond to the truth in any way."

The U.S. Embassy to the Holy See also pushed back, writing on social media that "deliberate misrepresentation of these routine meetings sows unfounded division and misunderstanding."

Millies, meanwhile, questioned whether anything the pope or U.S. bishops say can sway individual Catholics. Trump is likely to lose support among Catholics as he loses support across the broader electorate, Millies said, but that's not necessarily because members of Leo's flock are applying church doctrine.

"Partisan preferences always trump the religious commitments," Millies said, describing a "disconnect" between church leaders and many parishioners who look to other sources, politicians included, when shaping their views of faith and politics.

"The icon of Catholicism in American politics now is JD Vance, and it’s more about winning an argument," he said. "It’s a very different emphasis, but it’s one that may suit the Trump administration very well."

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