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U.S. Vice President JD Vance speaks during the 53rd annual March for Life rally in Washington

U.S. Vice President JD Vance speaks during the 53rd annual March for Life rally in Washington Jan. 23, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Aaron Schwartz)



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Hours after Pope Leo XIV paid public homage to St. Augustine, one of the key architects of just war theory, Vice President JD Vance questioned the pontiff's understanding of the Catholic doctrine for determining whether a war is morally justifiable.

"When the pope says that God is never on the side of people who wield the sword, there is more than a 1,000-year tradition of just war theory," Vance said at a Turning Point USA event hosted at the University of Georgia on April 14. "We can, of course, have disagreements about whether this or that conflict is just."

"How do you say that God is never on the side of those who wield the sword?" he asked, citing the example of U.S. troops that had liberated France from the Nazis and freed prisoners from the Holocaust camps.

"I think it's very, very important for the pope to be careful when he talks about matters of theology," Vance said. "If you're going to opine on matters of theology, you've got to be careful. You've got to make sure it's anchored in the truth and that's one of the things that I try to do and it's certainly something I would expect from the clergy."

The vice president, who met Leo at the Vatican in May and has a book on his conversion to Catholicism due out this summer, responded to a post on the pope's X account in which he wrote that God is "never on the side of those who once wielded the sword and today drop bombs."

Leo has acknowledged that many have called the United States and Israel's war with Iran unjust, including Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington D.C who said the war fails the criteria for a just war.

"You cannot satisfy the just war tradition's criterion of right intention if you do not have a clear intention," the cardinal said in an interview discussing the war in Iran.

Vance, who had chosen St. Augustine as his patron saint, made his comments just hours after the pope traveled to Annaba, Algeria, to pay homage to his spiritual father St. Augustine, the North African saint who played a fundamental role in developing just war theory.

Augustine, a doctor of the church and one of the greatest intellectual influences on Western thought, argued that war is morally justified when oriented toward the restoration of peace. Later thinkers, particularly St. Thomas Aquinas, further developed Augustine's thought and established the criteria for determining whether a war is just.

The catechism teaches that the use of military force must consider whether the damage inflicted by an aggressor is "lasting, grave, and certain," and states that the "use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated."

Leo spoke on the topic in a March 7 address to military ordinaries.

"This is the context in which the mission of the Christian soldier is situated," he said. "Defending the weak, protecting peaceful coexistence, intervening in disasters, operating in international missions to preserve peace and restore order. All this cannot be reduced to a mere profession: it is a vocation, a response to a call that challenges the conscience."

Leo, the first pope to be a member of the Augustinian religious order inspired by the saint, traveled to Algeria to visit the site of ancient Hippo, the Roman city where Augustine was a bishop for 34 years.

Celebrating Mass in the Basilica of St. Augustine in Annaba which overlooks the ancient site, the pope said "the guiding principle above all for Christians is charity."

Before becoming a bishop, Leo was head of the global Augustinian religious order inspired by the life and teachings of the saint; he wrote his doctoral dissertation on St. Augustine’s understanding of authority.

The pope has had a longstanding relationship with Augstine: His brothers attended an Augustinian high school in a Chicago suburb, where his mother worked as a librarian, and Leo himself attended an Augustinian-run minor seminary for high school in Holland, Michigan.

En route to Algeria, the pope said he has "no fear of the Trump administration," following an attack lodged against him by President Donald Trump on Truth Social in which he wrote that the pope is "weak on crime and terrible for foreign policy."

The president again posted about the pope on April 14, asking that "someone please tell Pope Leo that Iran has killed 42,000 innocent, completely unarmed, protestors in the last two months, and that for Iran to have a Nuclear Bomb is absolutely unacceptable."

The death toll from Iran's crackdown on protestors is largely unknown, but has been estimated to be over 30,000.

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