Opinion
Editorial
U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a video message originally shared at an April eve

U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a video message originally shared at an April event and played at "Rededicate 250: A National Jubilee of Prayer, Praise & Thanksgiving" at the National Mall in Washington, May 17, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Eric Lee)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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The manipulation of the Christian faith into a national rally in support of the most corrupt presidential administration in U.S. history is a crowning achievement of President Trump's core project, the destruction of any norms and the obliteration of any principles that impede his ambitions.

The distortions of the Christian message and of U.S. history necessary to pull off the daylong May 17 event "Rededicate 250" on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., were breathtaking. The fact that ranking prelates of the Catholic Church were complicit in advancing those distortions is not only deeply disturbing, but makes clear the stakes involved.

The presentations by Cardinal Timothy Dolan, past archbishop of New York, and Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, were, in isolation, rather inconsequential, if generally in line with the mood of the day.

The context in which their remarks were delivered, however, is of great consequence. If, in the classic formulation, "he who is silent seems to consent," then he who speaks, in this instance, removes any ambiguity. The cardinal and the bishop

were all-in participants.

Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, a member of the U.S. Religious Liberty

Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, a member of the U.S. Religious Liberty Commission, speaks at "Rededicate 250: A National Jubilee of Prayer, Praise & Thanksgiving" at the National Mall in Washington, May 17, 2026. (OSV News screenshot)

Participants in what?

We respect the depth and sincerity of faith of individuals who joined the event on the mall. At the same time, we would be utterly naive and irresponsible if we failed to step in as a Christian voice that strongly condemns the appropriation of a small segment of the Christian population in an attempt to recast the United States as a theocracy. The event was another step by religious and political extremists intent on destroying the wall that separates church and state as well as the constitutional guarantees of freedom of – and from — religion.

The event was announced months ago by Trump, who does nothing without the expectation of personal benefit in return. He knew what he was doing, inviting only one representative of a faith other than Christianity and restricting invitations to only Christian leaders and influencers who had already shown loyalty to him and who are willing to contort Christianity to the degree necessary to conform to his wishes.

Not on the agenda were representatives from another rally of religious leaders and activists the day before who re-enacted the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. This one was in protest of the Supreme Court's dismantling of the Voting Rights Act and continuing Republican efforts to disenfranchise Black voters. That rally's view of God's action in U.S. history and of what Christianity means in the public square would have differed greatly from the gathering on the National Mall.

> The Prince of Peace would have been an unavoidable stumbling block amid those who celebrate militarism, national dominance and wars of choice.
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The D.C. rally was Trump's version of branding a religion. He doesn't care a whit about theological considerations, historical data or constitutional obstacles. He needs a religion that won't bother him with any of the ethical and moral annoyances that other religious leaders keep raising. He needs a religion that will simply be loyal to him and nod yes to whatever he says and does. On May 17, that religion was on full display.

The raw ingredients for outrage are piled high in this latest example of Trump attempting to construct an alternative reality. But a more detached assessment leads beyond the distraction of the moment to deeper considerations and unavoidable questions.

To be clear, whatever individuals may have been thinking or praying, what we witnessed being celebrated from the podium and big screens on the National Mall was proud and self congratulatory, not the humble prayer spoken quietly and in gratitude that Jesus said would be exalted.

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What was proclaimed was not the Gospel that elevates the poor, the widow, the outcast, the stranger or those in prison. Such an authentic Christian message constitutes an affront to the violent taking of immigrants, the separation of children from parents, the lust for reinstating the death penalty, the justification for ending food aid and health programs here and abroad and the consequent suffering and deaths of untold thousands.

Such a Gospel would have contradicted the ascendant civil religion of exclusion, the one that justifies disenfranchising people of color; denigrating those whose sexuality does not conform to the majority; and excluding, even from a national prayer celebration, those of other faiths and even those who claim the same faith but are led by it in a very different direction.

The Prince of Peace would have been an unavoidable stumbling block amid those who celebrate militarism, national dominance and wars of choice. He would have found unrecognizable as Christian practice the wished union of church and state as well as the required marginalizing of other faiths that are central components of Christian nationalism.

On display was the religion of empire, not that of the Suffering Servant. The Christian pep rally on the National Mall provides Trump the religious gloss that will keep a portion of his base loyal and able to rationalize whatever he does.

But this is a false reading of history — the United States was never a Christian nation , nor should it be so deemed. Apocryphal, romantic lore — George Washington kneeling and praying in the snow — are insufficient to sustain a sober and spiritually mature search for where God and our faith fit in this experiment in democracy currently being severely tested.

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The event in Washington was repeatedly touted as a rededication of the country to God.

But whose God?

Is it the God of those who preached Christian nationalism on the mall or that of the preachers and believers who marched in Selma?

Is it the God of those who plan aggressive ICE raids? Or is it the God who mourns with devastated parents and bewildered children who have been cruelly separated?

Is it the God of architects of war or the God of schoolchildren needlessly killed in an unjustified bombings?

Is it exclusively the God of Christians or might we include Jews in synagogue or Muslims worshipping at the local mosque?

Could it be the God of a growing number of other Catholic cardinals and bishops and an increasing number of other religious leaders of all faiths who are speaking up and acting in resistance to the destructive and inhumane policies of the Trump administration?

Is it the God of the organizers of the mall rally? Or is it the God who loves them and lies beyond their purposes and imaginations?

President Trump, as is too often the case, got what he needed for the moment.

Our hope is that the infinitely loving, merciful, forgiving God of history, not the god of a political moment, will see us through the long haul.

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