News
Explainer



A man works on a chalk drawing depicting the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Oct. 28, 2017, in Lima, Peru. (AP File/Martin Mejia)

Peter Smith

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Orlando, Fla. — June 10, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

To mark the 250th anniversary of the United States, Catholic bishops from across the nation will come together Thursday to consecrate the country to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The church service, part of the bishops' spring assembly meeting in Orlando, Florida, draws from a mainstream, centuries-old Catholic devotion that focuses on Jesus' sacrificial love for humanity. Many Catholics hold similar dedications of their homes and businesses.

At the same time, the devotion to the Sacred Heart has also taken on political overtones and drawn controversy elsewhere. Sometimes it has been connected with Catholic nationalism; at other times it has been promoted as the opposite — as an antidote to the idolatry of the state.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops intends to use the consecration service to promote service to God, country and the needy, said Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, who chairs the bishops' committee on religious liberty.

"As we reflect with gratitude on the blessings God has bestowed on our country, our devotion to the Sacred Heart demands that we consider how we might foster truth, justice and charity in American life," Sample said in a video promoting the service.

Other countries dedicated to the Sacred Heart

This would be the first time U.S. Catholic leaders have held such a service, though it's not unprecedented.

Bishops in several other countries in Europe and Latin America have dedicated their lands to the Sacred Heart, sometimes with the participation of political leaders. The practice began in Ecuador in 1874. Most of these ceremonies took place in countries with majority-Catholic populations, unlike the U.S.

Pope Leo XIII — the most recent namesake of the current pontiff — consecrated the whole world to the Sacred Heart in 1899.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart has been promoted by multiple popes. The late Pope Francis highlighted the Sacred Heart as an inspiration for service and justice. Pope Leo XIV urged an audience to turn "to the Sacred Heart, model of true humanity."

The devotion also has been politically controversial in some countries. It has been invoked in support of a blend of Catholicism and nationalism.

The landmark Basilica of Sacre-Coeur (Sacred Heart) in Paris has long been perceived as a symbol of Catholic resistance to secularism amid France's revolutionary turbulence.

More recently, a French film titled "Sacre Coeur" tells the story of a 17th century French nun's visions that gave rise to the modern devotion.

The docudrama drew large crowds in France last year despite criticism from some secular and Catholic sources. One group of progressive Catholics, writing in the publication La Croix, lamented the film was being used "to further a political agenda obsessed with reaffirming France's Christian identity."

The movie began being distributed in American theaters Tuesday.

Separately, a Catholic group launched a billboard campaign this month promoting June as the official month of the Sacred Heart. A Republican candidate for Florida governor, James Fishback, officially consecrated his campaign to the Sacred Heart.

There is precedent for a devotional expression to take on controversial political overtones, even if it's neutral and spiritual on its own.

The phrase "Christ is king" has increasingly been proclaimed in U.S. political settings, at times used in connection with Christian nationalist proclamations or even anti-Zionist or antisemitic claims.

Advertisement

A long history of devotion to a 'king with a heart'

Catholic scholar Robert Fastiggi, who has researched the long history of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, said the U.S. bishops' consecration service should be seen as a unifying step in a polarizing time.

It counters any effort to idolize the state — instead promoting Jesus as "a king with a heart," he said.

"There's such polarization or infelicitous language even coming from the president of the United States, threatening violence and annihilation on a whole civilization," Fastiggi said in an interview. "Pope Leo was correct in saying this is unacceptable."

Consecrating to the Sacred Heart, Fastiggi said, is "reminding ourselves we're answerable to the law of God and of love."

A visionary nun and a pope's healing

The devotion to the Sacred Heart has ancient roots, but it began taking its modern shape in the 17th century, Fastiggi wrote in the academic journal Religions in 2025.

That's when a French nun, St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, reported visions of Jesus revealing "the marvels of His love and the inexplicable secrets of His Sacred Heart."

Numerous religious orders and fraternal organizations formed to spread this devotion. Parishes and schools took the name Sacred Heart.

A 19th century German nun, Blessed Marie of the Divine Heart, urged then-Pope Leo XIII to consecrate the entire world to the Sacred Heart. She foretold that he would be healed of a dangerous disease.

Leo XIII obliged, reporting the healing in an encyclical that promoted the devotion.

Today, many Catholic homes, businesses and churches feature images of Jesus with his Sacred Heart exposed, often accompanied by flames, a cross and a crown of thorns to symbolize suffering love. The devotion is often combined with veneration of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

This story appears in the **USCCB Spring Assembly 2026** and **USA 250** feature series.