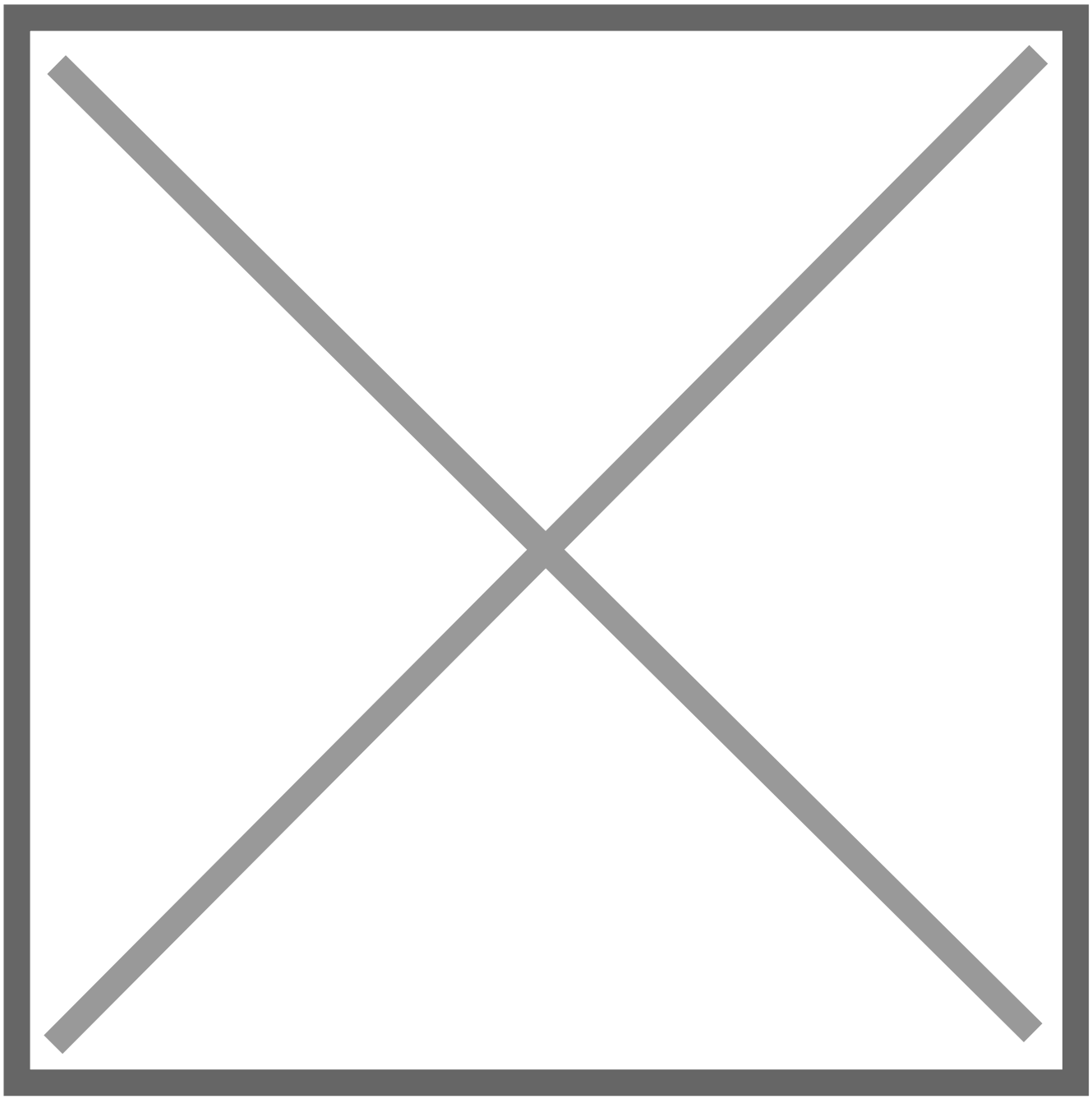
News



Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy walks back to his seat after receiving the pallium from Pope Leo XIV during Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 29, 2025, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington said his decision to remove a high-profile priest as an archdiocesan exorcist was driven by the public way he exercised his ministry, not by his specific beliefs about UFOs.

Following comments on social media linking UFOs to demonic activity, Msgr. Stephen Rossetti was removed in early June as an exorcist for the Archdiocese of Washington.

In one of his first interviews since the decision, McElroy told Catholic News Service it should not be interpreted as a judgment on unidentified flying objects or extraterrestrial life, but in what he sees as the proper role of an exorcist within the Catholic Church.

"It wasn't touching on the question of UFOs," the cardinal said in an interview June 29 at the Pontifical North American College. "My major objection is that I think the traditional role of an exorcist is a very private one. It's a sacred one."

Rossetti has built one of the largest online followings among Catholic exorcists through the St. Michael Center for Spiritual Renewal, with more than 146,000 followers on YouTube, as well as tens of thousands more on his personal Instagram, where he regularly discusses exorcism, spiritual warfare and demonic activity.

In May, Rossetti posted online that "probably many, if not most, UFO sightings are in fact demons," drawing widespread attention as public interest in unidentified anomalous phenomena, or UAP — the government's official term for what are

commonly called UFOs — has increased in recent years.

On June 3, McElroy said in a press release that "statements made by Msgr. Rossetti linking UFOs to demonic presence and the Center's recent use of social media gravely undermine the Church's very precise teaching on the devil, demons and exorcism."

The removal has since prompted widespread debate among Catholics over whether the action reflected the archdiocese's position on extraterrestrial life or on Rossetti's assertion that many UFO sightings are demonic.

Some Catholics agree with Rossetti's views. U.S. Vice President JD Vance has previously said, "I don't think they're aliens. I think they're demons anyway."

Others have argued on social media and in the press that the issue was more about presenting personal speculation as Church teaching. In an interview with The New York Times after Rossetti's removal, Christopher Baglow, director of the Science and Religion Initiative at the McGrath Institute for Church Life, said Rossetti may have overstepped by "putting forward his own doctrine as something Catholics should accept."

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McElroy told CNS that exorcists perform a ministry entrusted to them by their bishop in particularly "serious cases" and that the office should remain focused on that pastoral mission.

"I think the more traditional approach of an exorcist is a private, within-the-life-of-the-Church ministry to help individuals who are in crisis and seem to be demonically possessed," he said in the interview. "It shouldn't go beyond that for people who are doing exorcism."

The cardinal added that he believes exorcists should remain "more faithful to the traditional role the Church has had for exorcists." The webpage on exorcisms on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops site says "the preservation of confidentiality is important."

Following his removal, Rossetti issued a statement expressing sadness over the decision and asking forgiveness "for any ways in which I have failed to remain fully obedient to the Magisterium of the Church." He said the St. Michael Center for Spiritual Renewal would continue its ministry independently.

Debates about UFOs and whether they are tied to demons are not new to Catholics. Priests and theologians have argued for decades that the Church has no official teaching on extraterrestrial life. Some Catholic theologians have said the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe is not incompatible with the faith.

But a fresh wave of public interest in UFOs has continued to grow inside Catholic circles, driven by U.S. government disclosures on the subject and a string of recent films.

On July 7, filmmakers released the trailer for "Not of This World: Catholic Faith in the Age of Disclosure," a documentary series examining how Catholics are responding to UFO questions.

Produced by Catholic filmmaker Sam Sorich, the project features interviews with theologians, UFO researchers, national security officials, clergy and exorcists, prompted in part by claims from a former CIA official that the Vatican possesses evidence of nonhuman intelligence.

The documentary follows Catholic discussions of the issue, including a June private screening at Rome's Cinema Barberini of Steven Spielberg's film "Disclosure Day," organized by Sorich. Attendees included clergy, journalists and students from pontifical universities.

Among those attending was Michael Severance of the Acton Institute, who said the possibility of intelligent extraterrestrial life would not necessarily conflict with Catholic belief.

"I don't doubt that if there are intelligent or human-like forms in the universe that they also couldn't be made perfect or they couldn't fall or have the same destiny of salvation that we do," he said June 3.

Veteran Vatican journalist Delia Gallagher said the issue is likely to become increasingly important for Catholics.

"This is a topic that is destined to become more important," she said. "The Vatican will eventually — it could be years — have something more concrete to say about it."