

[News](#)



Chad Pecknold speaks March 26, 2019, during a conference at the Catholic University of America Washington. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

[View Author Profile](#)

cbarone@ncronline.org

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 11, 2026

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

A prominent Catholic theologian who has defended restrictive immigration policies through the lens of Catholic political thought has joined President Donald Trump's Department of Homeland Security, placing an influential voice of the Catholic "postliberal" right inside the agency overseeing the administration's immigration crackdown.

Chad Pecknold, a longtime theology professor at the Catholic University of America, began serving in August as principal director of public outreach in DHS's Office of Public Engagement. Pecknold, who is on leave from the university for public service, told the National Catholic Register that it was "truly an honor to serve my country in this capacity."

His arrival comes at a particularly fraught moment in relations between the Trump administration and the Catholic hierarchy. In November 2025, the U.S. bishops took the unusual step of issuing a "[Special Message](#)" opposing the "indiscriminate mass deportation of people" and [condemning dehumanizing rhetoric and violence](#). Pope Leo XIV subsequently [endorsed the bishops' intervention](#), stressing that countries have a right to control their borders but urging authorities to treat migrants humanely and with dignity.

Pecknold has spent years articulating a markedly different emphasis in Catholic teaching on immigration.

In a March essay for the Claremont Institute's *The American Mind* publication, he [challenged](#) the bishops' defense of birthright citizenship, arguing that citizenship should not be confused with a natural right inherent in every human being. He opened the essay by asking what victory over foreign enemies would mean if Americans ended up "losing our country to internal threats," before identifying the migration crisis as one such domestic challenge.

That argument follows a line Pecknold has made repeatedly. In 2024, he [invoked](#) St. Thomas Aquinas to argue that human dignity does not automatically override

national sovereignty and said statesmen sometimes have a "sacred duty" to restrict who can enter and remain in a country.

Advertisement

His rhetoric has at times gone further. In a June 2026 X [post](#) preserved by a third-party social-media index, Pecknold argued that the central immigration question was not economic or legal but the definition of the nation. "America is not an idea, it is a PEOPLE," he wrote, describing a nation as bound by a shared "faith, heritage, history, language" and arguing that viewing America as a people logically pointed toward closed borders.

In February, Pecknold [appeared](#) at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington for a [symposium](#) on migration organized around a paper from Budapest's Axioma Center. Pecknold endorsed the paper, which said that although Christian teaching requires compassion toward refugees, rulers also have obligations to preserve security, public order and social cohesion. It added, "Mass deportations may be a legitimate response to mass migration."

At the event, Pecknold argued mass migration could harm both migrant and American families and urged Christians to think "outside of the bounds of liberalism."

The Hungarian connection is part of a much broader intellectual trajectory.

Pecknold has [participated](#) in events associated with the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, or MCC, an institution lavishly funded under the government of Viktor Orban. MCC itself lists Pecknold among its international guests, and he participated in its 2023 festival [arguing](#) for a return to "Christian nationalism" during a religion panel.

Pecknold has also spoken admiringly of Orbán's political project. In a 2025 [interview](#) with the Hungarian Conservative, Pecknold compared the Trump-Orban relationship to the Reagan-Thatcher partnership, saying both Trump and Orban see liberalism as destructive of the family, borders and the cultural bonds that hold nations together.

In the same interview, he praised Hungary for understanding that Christianity should have an "unashamed place" in public life and described Christianity as "a kind of fundament for the state."

A sharply critical Providence [essay](#) published this year placed Pecknold within what author James Patterson called Orban's "Grand Budapest Cartel," describing Pecknold and fellow postliberal scholars [Patrick Deneen](#), Adrian Vermeule and Sohrab Ahmari as ideological allies of figures in Orban's orbit, and Pecknold and Deneen as "regular visitors to Hungary." The article alleged a wider Hungarian campaign to shape American conservatism. It did not establish that Pecknold himself received Hungarian government funding.

Those same networks also connect Pecknold to Vice President JD Vance.

In October 2022, Pecknold helped organize the ["Restoring a Nation" conference](#) at the Franciscan University of Steubenville alongside Ahmari, Deneen, Vermeule and Gladden Pappin.

Pecknold [told](#) the conference that conservatives could not answer "left liberalism with liberalism" and called for a "public orientation to God," reflected in measures such as national holidays and civic liturgies. "A perfect society has elevating power to unite us to our final end, which is God," he said.

Vance, then a Republican Senate candidate, closed the conference, telling the audience that he was on "the vanguard of a new Republican Party."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. [View the full series](#).