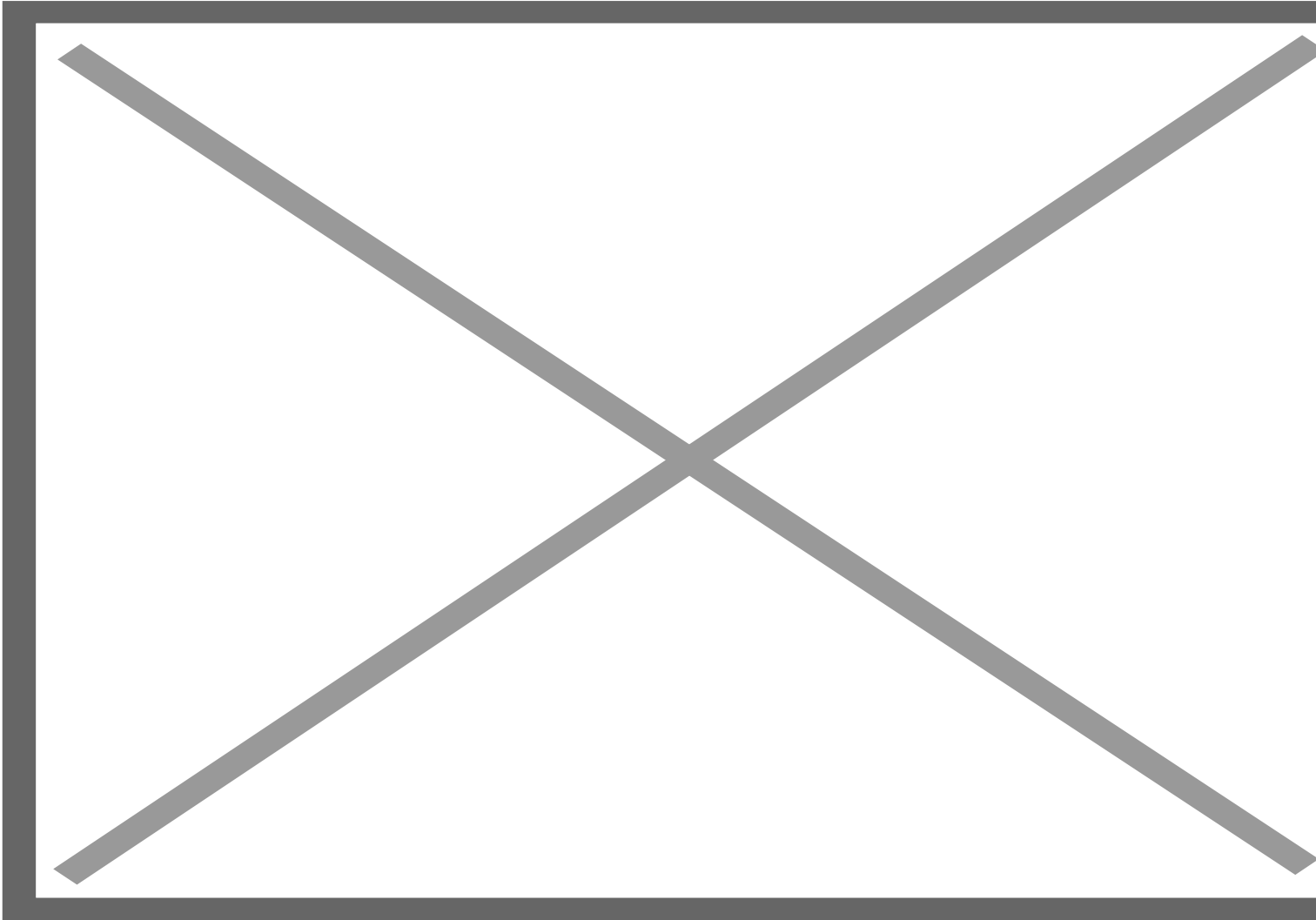


In criticizing Leo and posting image of himself resembling Jesus, Trump sparks outcry from religious allies

by [Jack Jenkins](#) and [Aleja Hertzler-McCain](#)

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An AI-generated image that President Donald Trump shared on social media. (Screen grab)

A pair of social media posts published by President Donald Trump over the weekend have stirred backlash, including from some of the president's Catholic and evangelical supporters, who condemned his strident criticism of Pope Leo and an image he posted depicting himself as a Jesus-like figure.

The first post, which was published at around 9:00 p.m. ET Sunday evening, focused on Pope Leo, who has been critical of the Trump administration's actions in the Iran war. In a lengthy statement, Trump declared the pontiff

is “weak” on crime and nuclear weapons, and ultimately claimed Leo was only elevated to the papacy to counter the president.

“Leo should be thankful because, as everyone knows, he was a shocking surprise,” Trump wrote.

“He wasn’t on any list to be Pope, and was only put there by the Church because he was an American, and they thought that would be the best way to deal with President Donald J. Trump. If I wasn’t in the White House, Leo wouldn’t be in the Vatican.”

Less than an hour later, Trump posted an image to Truth Social that appeared to depict the president as a Christ figure healing a sick individual. Radiant light bloomed from the president’s hand and behind his frame, as four people looked on. Hovering in the clouds above Trump are five figures—one of which appeared to have wings and horns. A US flag flapped in the wind nearby as bald eagles soared alongside fighter jets above the Statue of Liberty.

Sometime late Monday morning, the image was deleted from Trump’s Truth Social page.

Speaking to reporters later in the day, Trump said he published the post but [claimed](#) he believed the image, which features the president draped in a red shawl as light radiates from his hands, depicted him as a “doctor.”

Asked if he would apologize to Pope Leo, Trump said no, “because Pope Leo said things that are wrong.”

But both of Trump’s posts immediately kicked off a firestorm of criticism when they were published, adding to [mounting tensions](#) between the Trump administration and a wide array of religious leaders.

Pope Leo [told reporters](#) he does not believe Trump’s message showcased an understanding of “what the message of the gospel is,” and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops issued [a statement](#) with unusual speed condemning the president’s remarks about Pope Leo.

“I am disheartened that the President chose to write such disparaging words about the Holy Father,” read USCCB President Archbishop Paul S. Coakley’s statement. “Pope Leo is not his rival; nor is the Pope a politician. He is the Vicar of Christ who speaks from the truth of the Gospel and for the care of souls.”

Catholic allies of the pope also spoke out, including two US Cardinals who were part of the papal conclave that ultimately elected Pope Leo. In a statement, Cardinal Blase Cupich, of Chicago, said of the posts, “The substance of Pope Leo’s message should be the focus of discussions not distractions.”

In addition, Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, archbishop of Newark, reaffirmed that Pope Leo “serves a higher authority and desires to proclaim the Gospel faithfully and advance the Church’s peaceful mission in a world deeply in need of healing” before condemning Trump’s remarks.

“Recent statements and actions by the President of the United States convey a grave misunderstanding of the Holy Father’s ministry and a troubling lack of respect for the faith of millions,” Tobin wrote. “The graphic exploitation of sacred imagery is deeply offensive and undermines the reverence owed to what believers hold most dear.”

Tobin and Cupich, who occupy the relatively liberal flank of the bishops conference, both appeared Sunday night in a segment aired on CBS’s *60 Minutes*. The episode aired around the time of Trump’s posts.

On Monday mid-day, RNS spoke with a handful of mass-goers outside the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington. The majority said they had not seen Trump’s post about Leo. But from across the political

spectrum, they voiced praise for the pope and concerns about the war in the Middle East.

Two self-described Trump voters said they had not seen the post but that they had concerns about the war, including the death of a in an Israeli attack and Trump's language about, as one put it, "wiping out" Iran.

Both spoke more positively about Leo than Trump. "Pope Leo has said some confusing things to me, but far less disturbing than what Trump has said about Pope Leo," said one man, who also felt Leo could be more clear on what constitutes a just war.

The other, a millennial woman who wants to see Leo advance the old Latin mass, said she hopes Catholics in the Trump administration like JD Vance will "keep (Trump) in check" until he can meet with Leo.

Both said their future votes would be guided by "pro-life" issues, including abortion.

Steven Billet, an adjunct professor for the University of Notre Dame's Washington Program, said that he had seen the post and that Trump was "out of bounds."

Billet, who described himself as center-left, said, "I'm very encouraged by what the church is actually doing now on the war and on immigration issues because this administration clearly has it wrong."

A 26-year-old woman entering mass, who had seen the post and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said Leo is "just preaching the message of peace, which is what he should be doing and what we're called to do. I would be worried if the pope weren't."

The woman declined to provide her political affiliation but said it was "absurd" to presume the pope has a foreign policy or crime policy. "I think that asking the pope to be political about anything is obviously ridiculous. He is a religious leader. He's not a politician."

On social media, the posts also elicited strong reactions from Trump's religious allies, including Bishop Robert Barron, of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester, who serves on Trump's religious liberty commission and has appeared with the president multiple times in recent months.

"The statements made by President Trump on Truth Social regarding the Pope were entirely inappropriate and disrespectful," Barron [wrote](#) in a post on X. "They don't contribute at all to a constructive conversation."

Barron went on to praise the Trump administration for having "reached out to Catholics and other people of faith," but concluded that the president "owes the Pope an apology."

Other religious allies of the president—particularly evangelical leaders—focused their strongest rebukes on the seemingly AI-generated image of Trump as a Jesus-like figure.

"The image is disappointing and shouldn't have been posted," Tony Suarez, a longtime adviser of Trump, said in a text message. "It needs to be taken down immediately."

After the image was deleted from the president's Truth Social timeline, Suarez said the posting of the image should "still be addressed," explaining that it is "an offense to allude or depict that a human can compare to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Suarez also voiced praise for Pope Leo, saying he is "so loved by the people" and a "man of compassion who desires peace."

“I’m sure the post has grieved and offended my catholic friends and family which I find regrettable,” Suarez wrote. “While everyone, including the President, is entitled to share their opinion, I humbly disagree with what was posted.”

Sean Feucht, a conservative Christian activist who has [long operated in Trump-aligned circles](#), issued a forceful rebuke of the image in a post on X.

“This should be deleted immediately,” Feucht wrote, [referring to the image](#). “There’s no context where this is acceptable.”

Doug Wilson, a [self-described Christian nationalist](#) who has been at times hesitant to embrace Trump but has also served as a religious inspiration to Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, in [multiple X posts](#) referred to the image as [blasphemous](#).

In a separate email, Wilson said the image was “blasphemous, and Trump should take it down, and apologize for whatever series of decisions led to its being put up in the first place.” But he was far less critical of Trump’s post about Pope Leo.

“I think that Trump’s interaction with the pope was just typical Trumpian rhetoric aimed at a political opponent, which is what the pope was being,” Wilson said in the email.

Meg Basham, a conservative evangelical writer for The Daily Wire and longtime Trump supporter, [condemned](#) the image as “OUTRAGEOUS blasphemy,” saying the president needed to take down the image “immediately” and “ask for forgiveness from the American people and then from God.”

Asked Monday morning about the firestorm of criticism, a White House spokesperson responded by stating, “We refer you to the President’s TRUTH for this Inquiry.”

Friction between Trump and Catholic leadership has been simmering since the president’s 2016 campaign. In February of that year, Pope Francis responded to a question about Trump’s proposed border wall between the US and Mexico by criticizing the idea and [concluding](#), “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian.”

Trump fired back, calling Francis’s comments “disgraceful.”

The frustration continued into his second term, such as when Vice President JD Vance, himself a Catholic, questioned whether US Catholic Bishops were genuinely concerned about undocumented immigrants or just wanting to protect “their bottom line.” Shortly before his death last year, Francis sent a letter to US bishops publicly rebuking Vance’s religious defense of the administration’s mass deportation policy.

Vance eventually worked to [distance himself from the controversy](#), but Pope Leo has been outspoken against the Iran war and the cruel treatment of immigrants.

Criticism has come from domestic Catholic leaders as well: Last fall, the bishops issued their first “special message” in over a decade to criticize the Trump administration’s mass deportation policy. Earlier in 2024, the USCCB sued the administration over its decision to largely freeze the refugee program, and multiple Catholic priests and organizations have signed on to legal challenges to certain DHS immigrant detention facilities that have barred faith leaders from entering.

Other Catholic allies of the president refrained from weighing in. Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, instead took to social media to critique Cupich, Tobin, and Cardinal Robert McElroy’s appearance

on *60 Minutes*. Roberts, a Catholic, [claimed](#) young people are converting to the tradition “despite Cardinals like these.”

Reached Monday by phone, Robert Jeffress, a longtime religious advisor of Trump’s who leads First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, declined to comment on the AI-generated image. But he defended the president’s criticism of Pope Leo, saying there was “no need” for Trump to apologize to the pontiff.

“What the president said was absolutely correct,” Jeffress said. “Pope Leo apparently doesn’t have a biblical understanding of what the government’s role is in protecting its citizens from those who would do us harm both from within and without our country.”

Jeffress, who said he discussed the Iran war with Trump in the Oval Office three days after it began, argued the president has a “God-given responsibility to protect our citizens from those who would do evil.” The pastor said the war with Iran is just, and that when he made a similar argument in a sermon delivered to his congregation the day before, the worshippers burst into applause.

“Make no mistake about it: the leadership of Iran is evil,” he said. —Religion News Service