

The Pope Bedevils Trump

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I might have to go back to church.

My mother always told me that the Catholic Church was greater than the men running it.

But I grew so disillusioned with the men running it while I was covering the sex abuse scandals that I could no longer stomach going to Mass.

The church that had helped form my sense of right and wrong as a child suddenly seemed blind about right and wrong.

But Pope Leo XIV, or Pope Bob, as the first American pope is sometimes affectionately called, may win me over.

President Trump has been rampaging around the globe like Grendel at dinner time, a rapacious, feral creature. Who could stand up to him?

The soft-spoken, humble Leo, who strives to unify, squared off against the bombastic, solipsistic Trump, who strives to divide. And watching the saintly pope school the amoral president is a blessed sight.

I'm sure His Holiness watched askance as Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth [cast](#) the conflict with Iran as a holy war, trying to put God on the American side as our troops are asked to rain "death and destruction from above" on "apocalyptic" Iranian foes.

In March, Hegseth called for "overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy," asking God to "break the teeth of the ungodly."

This past week, he recited a passage that was an adaptation of a Quentin Tarantino "Pulp Fiction" adaptation of a biblical passage: "And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to capture and destroy my brother."

He also denounced the press as the "Pharisees," plotting to harm the Trump administration the same way the Pharisees plotted to harm Jesus.

George W. Bush had to walk back his use of the word "crusade" in reference to the war on terror, given the offensive echo of the papacy's crusaders wiping out Muslims in the holy land.

But Hegseth is no historian. His book is called "American Crusade." He carries a Crusader Bible, [known](#) for violent pictures of early Christian wars. He is tattooed with a Crusader cross and the words "Deus vult" — Latin for "God wills it."

Hegseth could learn a lesson from George H.W. Bush. As a young pilot in World War II, Bush was shot down near a Japanese island. When he campaigned for president, Bush was asked what he was thinking as he floated in the Pacific, fearing he would be picked up by the enemy.

He replied that he was thinking about "fundamental values," such as "the separation of church and state."

During Easter week, the pope seemed to chide Hegseth, saying that the Christian mission has often been “distorted by a desire for domination, entirely foreign to the way of Jesus Christ.”

On Easter Sunday, Trump [blasted out](#) one of his assorted threats to destroy Iranian civilization, crudely appending the phrase “Praise be to Allah.” Leo called the existential extortion “truly unacceptable,” a transgression against moral law.

Trump escalated. He posted a meme of himself as a Jesus-like figure healing a sick man and he attacked the Holy Father on social media with sinful aspersions, [saying](#) the pope is “WEAK on crime” and “I don’t want a Pope who thinks it’s OK for Iran to have a Nuclear Weapon.”

Leo, who’s Chicago-tough, hasn’t backed down. On X, he [said](#): “God does not bless any conflict. Anyone who is a disciple of Christ, the Prince of Peace, is never on the side of those who once wielded the sword and today drop bombs.”

He reminded the authoritarian, Strangelovian president that he should be promoting peace through dialogue and multilateralism.

“Too many people are suffering today, too many innocent people have been killed,” Leo [told reporters](#), “and I believe someone must stand up and say that there is a better way.”

JD Vance, a fairly recent convert to Catholicism, dutifully jumped into the fray to try to brush back the pope and butter up Trump, lecturing Leo to “be careful when he talks about matters of theology” and [yapping](#) about the “tradition of just war theory.”

When you’re down in the weeds about whether it’s a just war or not, the answer is: probably not.

In a puerile fit of apparent retribution on Thursday, Trump [canceled](#) an \$11 million federal contract with Catholic Charities in Miami to house and feed migrant children coming to America alone. (Even my Trump-indulging sister found that disgusting.)

It’s hard for the president to give the pope the respect that he deserves because Trump clearly thinks that *he’s* the Messiah.

Right before Leo was elected, Trump put out a meme of himself [as the pope](#). He struts and peacocks, playacting as everything — a king, a pope, Jesus.

But the president should read the Grimms’ fairy tale about the poor man in a hovel who caught a magic fish. His wife pestered the man to ask for a bigger house, then a mansion, then to be king, then emperor, then pope. The fish granted all these wishes. But when the wife coveted even more and told the man to wish her to be “equal to God,” the fish cast them back into their hovel.

It is dangerous to play God — unless you’re God.