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Brian Burch speaks during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on his nomination to be ambassador to the Holy See, April 8 on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP photo/Jacquelyn Martin)



by Allison Prang

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Washington — April 8, 2025

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Brian Burch, President Donald Trump's nominee to be the country's ambassador to the Vatican, told senators on Tuesday (April 8) that he agreed with the administration's broad cuts to foreign aid, a move that has drawn pushback from Catholic relief groups that have relied on this funding.

Burch's remarks came during a [nomination hearing](#) in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for himself and two other potential U.S. ambassadors. Only a handful of senators on the 22-member committee posed questions to the nominees during the roughly hourlong hearing, during which ranking member Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) in particular prodded Burch on the government's aid cuts.

Burch, a Chicago-area resident who has been [critical of Pope Francis](#), is the co-founder of CatholicVote, an organization that tried to rally support among Catholics to elect Trump. In the hearing, he told senators he agrees with the administration's position on foreign aid but he also supports the Vatican's leadership on humanitarian issues.

"I know this is going to be a very challenging issue for myself in this role because of the Holy See's pattern and record of leadership when it comes to humanitarian causes and humanitarian assistance," Burch said, adding, when questioned, that he agrees with the Vatican's leadership on both.

Shaheen then asked Burch how he would explain the United States' position on foreign aid, saying that this appears to be at odds with the Vatican.

"This is going to be the challenge, because I think the president — and I fully support the president and the secretary — have addressed a long-overdue problem within some of our foreign aid, which is millions if not billions of our dollars have been going to places around the world that are not aligned with United States' interests," Burch replied.

"I think the partnership with [the] Holy See can be a very good one, but I think those partners have to understand that our foreign aid is not endless," he added.

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The Vatican late last month expressed dismay with the administration's slashing of foreign aid. Archbishop Paul Gallagher, secretary for relations with states at the Vatican's Secretariat of State, [said](#) the cuts are happening "at a time when it seems, to us, very evident that what the world is in need of now is more expressions of solidarity, not less." Caritas Internationalis, a collective of more than 160 Catholic groups focused on relief, development and social services, also [slammed cuts to foreign aid](#) by a host of countries, including the U.S.

Burch, during questioning, said he has heard from some Catholic relief organizations that "have recently been reauthorized," adding that "others, of course, are still pending."

In his prepared remarks for the committee, Burch said his "primary goal will be to deepen this partnership" between the Holy See and U.S.

"Let me also assure this committee that I fully understand the distinction between advocacy and diplomacy," he said. "As ambassador, my sole responsibility will be to represent the interests of the United States."

[Pope Francis](#) and the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#), have criticized the Trump administration for its policies related to immigration and Burch has pushed back against Francis. In 2023, he [told The New York Times](#) about all the ways conservative Catholics were offended by Francis. He's also [criticized Francis on the social media platform X](#), formerly known as Twitter.

But Burch also wasn't always a fan of Trump's. [The Chicago Tribune reported](#) that in 2016, the National Review published a letter saying Trump was "unfit to be president" that was signed by a group of Catholics, including Burch. Months later, CatholicVote, the organization Burch helped found, tried to build support for Trump among voters, according to the Tribune.

Burch declined to be interviewed after the hearing. The entire Senate has to vote on whether to confirm him to his post, but the timing of that vote is unclear.

Sen. Pete Ricketts (R-Neb.), in his introduction of Burch, highlighted the history of the position Burch is being nominated for, noting how during the Reagan administration, the ambassador to the Holy See helped forge a relationship between the former president and Pope John Paul II that helped bring about the downfall of

the Soviet Union. The relationship between the pope and the U.S. is "no less important today," Ricketts said.

"I have every confidence that Brian Burch will carry out these responsibilities with honor," Ricketts said.

Ricketts also asked Burch about [China's agreement with the Vatican related to the appointment of bishops](#). Burch said he thinks it's important "for the Holy See to maintain a posture of pressure and of applying pressure to the Chinese government around their human rights abuses, particularly their persecution of religious minorities, including Catholics."

"I would encourage the Holy See as the United States ambassador, if I'm confirmed, to resist the idea that a foreign government has any role whatsoever in choosing the leadership of a private religious institution," he said. "I do not believe the church should cede or surrender to any government, China or otherwise, the selection of their bishops."

That agreement between the Vatican and China, which [was extended again last year](#), has also sparked criticism from former Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) [who questioned in an interview with NCR last year](#) why China should be involved in naming bishops.

Related: [Brian Burch, critic of Pope Francis, to be vetted as Trump's Vatican ambassador](#)

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