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Seminarians lead a eucharistic procession from St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City Oct. 15, 2024. A few thousand worshippers packed the cathedral for Holy Hour and Mass before participating in the procession through Midtown Manhattan. The event was a collaboration of the Napa Institute and the Hallow prayer app. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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The recent [column](#) penned by Tim Busch and headlined by the National Catholic Register, "The Trump Administration: More Catholic Than You Know," may be stunning as a political endorsement, but it is far more important as a statement that twists Catholic thought into unrecognizable shapes. It is the most recent of Busch's pronouncements that raise serious questions about Catholicism's engagement in the wider culture and who represents the voice of church authority in this era.

Given the prominence of Busch on the Catholic landscape as the founder of the conservative Catholic [Napa Institute](#), two assertions in this piece should be taken seriously. The first, which even he labels "surprising," is his belief that the Trump administration "is the most Christian I've ever seen." The second: "Crucially, from what I've seen, the president's team is earnestly striving to apply the precepts of our faith to the policies that govern America." Let that sink in.

Donald Trump's presidency may be term limited, and politics can shift without warning, but there is no term limit to Busch's influence, and it doesn't appear his resources will run out anytime soon. Apparently, no existing structure, not even hierarchical authority, dares to challenge his public assertions.

Busch has long been an unabashed advocate for a brand of American religion that seeks respectability for the unbounded economic ambitions of its practitioners by wrapping itself in a veneer of piety. In his case, it is Catholic piety placed in service of an extreme libertarian agenda and what is turning out to be a politics of retribution, division and cruelty.

If that seems a harsh assessment, an extensive public record bears it out. Busch's wealth has gained him a significant share of the [ecclesial attention](#) economy as well as a name on the [business school](#) at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and a considerable influence over the [EWTN](#) publishing and broadcasting empires.

It is critical to both church and state which version of Catholicism shows up now in the public square.

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Knowing what led to Busch's ascendancy is an unnerving parallel to realizing that how Trump came to sit in the Oval Office is far more instructive in understanding who we are as a people than is the fact that he's president.

Trump is the perfect vessel to carry the acid that destroys the soft tissue binding democratic governance. Devoid of moral compass and oblivious to any purpose beyond himself and other rich and powerful elite, he is able to say and do what would have been political suicide for anyone in the past. His destruction of norms cleared the way for the real libertarian, Elon Musk, an unelected, unconfirmed, antigovernment billionaire whose fortunes depend on billions in government contracts. Musk was given the keys to the kingdom — and permission to destroy it.

A self-centered individualist in the extreme, Trump was a perfect match for the American ideology of individualism that had been honed, through trial and error, over decades. The ideology is antithetical to the Christian Gospel.

Likewise, the ideas advanced by Busch, who finds not only political commonality but sanctity in the Trump administration, did not materialize overnight or with the founding of his [Napa Institute](#) in 2010.

The libertarian/religious ideology he often places on prominent display has been under construction by others for decades. Busch, a successful lawyer who owns luxury resorts, is the perfect vehicle for carrying forward the work of those who have attempted to [Catholicize ideas and rationale](#) from the furthest extremes of secular economics and the politics of disruption.

A history of tension

The tension between unchecked American capitalism and the tenets of social justice based in Christian Scripture and Catholic teaching is nothing new.

In 1986, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a cutting-edge [document](#), "Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy." Several years in the making, it was "a work of careful inquiry, wide consultation," as

the bishops described it, a "process of listening and refinement" grounded in the conviction that "the obligation to 'love our neighbor' has an individual dimension, but also requires a broader social commitment to the common good."



The U.S. bishops gather in Washington, D.C., in November 1986. At the meeting, they approved their landmark pastoral "Economic Justice For All." (CNS file/Bob Strawn)

While the details of economics and politics have clearly changed in the decades since, the letter was clear on one immutable guide from Scripture and tradition: "No one may claim the name Christian and be comfortable in the face of hunger, homelessness, insecurity and injustice found in this country and the world."

Before the first draft had been issued, a group of conservative lay Catholics — co-chaired by [Michael Novak](#) of the American Enterprise Institute and former Treasury Secretary William Simon — released an 80-page rebuttal. The exchange caused the bishops to reconsider some points and make some changes. The lay group issued an [assessment](#) on the final version that, by today's standards, was amazingly civil in

its disagreements.

The attempts to make Catholic teaching compatible with unrestricted capitalism and business interests would evolve with the appearance of such groups as [Legatus](#), which self-describes as "the world's premiere organization" for Catholic "CEOs, company presidents, managing partners and business owners." Domino's Pizza founder Thomas Monaghan started Legatus in 1987, a year after the economics pastoral was issued. Monaghan went on to found Ave Maria University in Florida.

The Ethics and Public Policy Center was founded in 1976, prior to the pastoral, but with strong religious connections. The neoconservative think tank contributed to the development of Project 2025, the aims of which Musk is fulfilling. [Leonard Leo](#) — he of the Federalist Society, tons of dark money and friendship with Busch — is currently a member of the center's board.

The center is also the longtime home of [George Weigel](#), who remains a high-profile voice of Catholic neoconservatives and an apologist for the side of the economics debate that would defang Catholic social teaching of its more biting reality.

The Acton Institute was co-founded in 1990 by Fr. Robert Sirico and Kris Alan Mauren "on the basis of ten Core Principles, integrating Judeo-Christian Truths with Free Market Principles." The organization "promotes the benefits of free enterprise."



Msgr. Henry Breier, a St. Louis priest who is a regional chaplain for Legatus, celebrates Mass Feb. 8 for the 2025 Legatus International Summit held at the Ritz-Carlton in Naples, Fla. Legatus self-describes as "the world's premiere organization" for Catholic "CEOs, company presidents, managing partners and business owners." (OSV News/Tom Tracy)

Chelsea Ebin, author of *The Radical Mind: The Origins of Right-Wing Catholic and Protestant Coalition Building*, notes in an August 2024 [essay](#) the influence of right-wing Catholic thinking on the [Heritage Foundation](#), the driving force behind today's Project 2025. Paul Weyrich, a traditionalist Catholic and co-founder of the foundation in 1973, thought "conservative policymaking needed to adopt a new moralism that went far beyond the tenets of fiscal responsibility and small-government conservatism. It also had to embrace a conservative Christian worldview and seek to impose a narrow definition of the common good on society," Ebin wrote in the essay.

Unbounded capitalism was the focus of three [conferences](#) held from 2014 to [2017](#) by the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at Catholic University, under the heading "Erroneous Autonomy."

The tone was set during the [first session](#), "Erroneous Autonomy: The Catholic Case Against Libertarianism." Honduran Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez, then chairman of Pope Francis' Council of Cardinals, offered a blunt critique of the ideology.

"A system has been built now as a new idolatry and it's only the true God that has to be served, and not worshipping idols, even if that idol is called market economy ... or the idol of libertarianism," he said.

"The libertarianism deregulation of the market is much to the disadvantage of the poor," Rodríguez said. "This economy kills. This is what the pope is saying."

The history above is hardly exhaustive. It is intended only to sketch some of the dimensions and breadth of the effort to make unrestricted capitalism compatible with Catholic teaching. The efforts keep running into obstacles such as Vatican II documents, papal encyclicals, bishops' pastorals and the heart of the Christian Scriptures.

What kind of church?

While no easy answers exist for the historic tension between the two poles tugging at the body politic, it is clear that the church has always endorsed those measures that do the most for the least among us.

That's why even the divided U.S. bishops were able to unite behind criticisms of the Trump administration's cutting of funding to relief efforts, its intent to conduct indiscriminate deportation, and its overturning of environmental protections and measures developed to combat climate change.

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So what does it mean when Busch, [extensively covered](#) by this publication in recent years, declares that this administration is both identifiably Catholic and the most Christian he's ever seen?

He is aware that he makes the claims in the face of objections to a host of administration policies and ambitions as outlined by the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Busch must know that the bishops ultimately [sued the administration](#) for cutting funding for refugee resettlement.

He must know that the administration has even drawn the [critique of Pope Francis](#), who, in a highly unusual move, wrote to those same bishops condemning the plans for mass deportation, encouraging the bishops to stand in the breach and exhorting all "not to give in to narratives that discriminate against and cause unnecessary suffering to our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters."

While Busch rails against secularization of society, there is little, if any, suggestion that excessive wealth, vast income disparity and corporate greed have anything to do with it. "We have a right to have wealth," he said in a 2007 talk in which he made an apparent reference to Bill Gates as an example of the kind of philanthropic good that can result from wealth, as if he were the benign standard.

An unfiltered exuberance often accompanies Busch's pronouncements, like the time he referred to a cardinal's presentation on Catholic social teaching tradition as a necessary hearing of "both sides" before introducing the main star of his [symposium](#) , billionaire libertarian Charles Koch, referred to by Busch as the "refounder of America."

It is beyond time we take what Busch says seriously. He is not speaking to hear himself. He is trying to fashion a church that conforms to an ideology.



Timothy Busch, co-founder and board chair of the Napa Institute, speaks at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City Oct. 15, 2024, before participating in a eucharistic procession that was organized by the Napa Institute and the Hallow prayer app. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Private chapels, a priest to say Mass at his office chapel every day, the ability to shut down Manhattan streets for a [eucharistic procession](#) — all of that projects a muscular Catholicism beyond the reach of ordinary people. But where does it fit with the Jesus who shunned flashy shows of religious practice, whose life was spent urgently and repeatedly uplifting and consoling those on the margins of society who would never have access to power or wealth?

Is this administration Catholic or Christian because the president just cut off vaccines to other countries? Because [Catholic Relief Services](#) and [Catholic Charities](#) have had to cease many operations since Musk took a chainsaw to their funding? Because Trump's agents are indiscriminately [rounding up people](#) they think fit the category of "illegals," even though more than a few are here legally, and hauling them off to third countries for incarceration in hellish conditions?

Does Busch really believe that Vice President JD Vance, who [insulted the U.S. bishops](#) by claiming their interest in refugee resettlement was driven by a concern for their bottom line, "may very well be the most articulate Catholic politician in the modern world?"

Hyperbole aside (and this would considerably edit Busch's pronouncements), he is pushing at the limits of Catholic teaching, much as Trump is pushing the limits of constitutional democratic order.

Busch may welcome a theocracy of sorts, but recent papacies have put that idea to rest. Our religious convictions are at their best when they witness what we believe by our care for the least among us. Catholicism is at its best when its witness and teachings inform political processes, not when it aims to subsume them and not when it becomes a partisan player.

We're beyond those times when we could ignore or escape the kinds of overwhelming questions we've arrived at under Trump. There is little, if anything, Christian about this administration — and a great deal that is openly hostile to the

teachings of Christ.

It is critical to both church and state which version of Catholicism shows up now in the public square. Will it be the version espousing gaudy shows of religiosity and the right to unimpeded wealth and power, or that of Francis' field hospital, a place of mercy and healing and accompanying the least among us?