News

U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a news conference in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House in Washington April 6, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Evan Vucci)

Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

View Author Profile

Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

View Author Profile
cbarone@ncronline.org

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Political religious leaders around the world are reacting with shock and outrage to President Donald Trump's April 12 attacks on Pope Leo XIV.

Catholic bishops, clergy, religious sisters, congressional representatives, political pundits and foreign heads of state were among those who condemned Trump's statements, including his post on Truth Social, since removed, that appeared to show Trump as a Christlike figure healing a man.

On Sunday night, Trump called the first U.S.-born pope "terrible on Foreign Policy," citing Leo's opposition to the ongoing war in Iran and U.S. military action in Venezuela and stating that his pontificate is hurting the church.

"I don't want a Pope who thinks it's OK for Iran to have a Nuclear Weapon," Trump posted to Truth Social April 12. "I don't want a Pope who criticizes the President of the United States because I'm doing exactly what I was elected, IN A LANDSLIDE, to do, setting Record Low Numbers in Crime, and creating the Greatest Stock Market in History."

Speaking to reporters Sunday night at Joint Base Andrews, Trump doubled down on his social media post. Trump said he was "not a big fan" of the pope, whom he deemed to be "a very liberal person" who "doesn't believe in stopping crime."

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The pope addressed Trump's attacks on his Monday morning flight to Algeria, during the first day of a trip that will bring him across four African countries.

"I have no fear of the Trump administration, or speaking out loudly of the message of the Gospel, which is what I believe I am here to do, what the church is here to do," he told an NBC News correspondent.

Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued one of the first public responses, expressing disappointment over the tone of the remarks directed at the pontiff. "I am disheartened that the President chose to write such disparaging words about the Holy Father," Coakley said. He emphasized that "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."

A sharper theological and moral critique came from Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, who warned in a statement that recent developments reflect both misunderstanding and disrespect toward the papacy. "In response to recent events, I reaffirm 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," Tobin said. He added that the pope "will continue to speak clearly against war and other offenses against human dignity."

Tobin also criticized what he called "a grave misunderstanding of the Holy Father's ministry and a troubling lack of respect for the faith of millions," calling Trump's use of sacred imagery, where he appeared as Jesus in a social media post, "deeply offensive."

The pope's antiwar statements and criticisms of the U.S. and Israeli-led war in Iran provided the backdrop to Trump's attacks on the pontiff.

A now-deleted post seen April 12, 2026, on U.S. President Donald Trump's Truth Social account depicts an AI-generated image of himself apparently as Jesus Christ. Trump posted the AI-generated image 46 minutes after delivering a social media tirade against Pope Leo XIV. (OSV News/@realDonaldTrump/Truth Social handout via Reuters)

On April 7, Trump threatened Iran, posting on social media, "a whole civilization will die," which prompted Leo to respond, saying such threats were "truly unacceptable."

On Saturday, Leo led a prayer vigil for peace in Rome, and while he did not mention Trump by name, his comments seemed aimed at the ongoing war.

"Enough of the idolatry of self and money! Enough of the display of power! Enough of war!" the pope said. "True strength is shown in serving life."

Las Vegas Archbishop George Leo Thomas offered a strongly supportive defense of Leo while directly addressing the president's rhetoric. "I am grateful to God for sending us Pope Leo XIV, who is willing to speak truth to power just when we need him the most," Thomas said in a statement. He praised the pope's emphasis on "dialogue over diatribe, prayer over politics, and diplomacy above destruction," adding that the pontiff would remain "unfazed by the President's ad hominem attacks and sophomoric rhetoric."

In a statement, Bishop John Dolan of Phoenix emphasized that the papacy is rooted in spiritual discernment rather than politics, saying the pope is elected "through the sacred process of the conclave, which is "not a political appointment, nor is it subject to influence by any head of state."

"The Church does not exist to advance political agendas, but to proclaim the Gospel, to form consciences, and to remind the world of the dignity of every human person. It is important to say clearly: the Holy Father is not a politician, nor should he be reduced to one. ... When he speaks about peace, justice, or the moral dimensions of global affairs, he does so not as a partisan voice, but as a pastor of the universal Church," he said in a statement.

Within the American Catholic intellectual and media landscape, Bishop Robert Barron — a prominent conservative voice and member of the Religious Liberty Commission at the White House — issued a rare critical statement posted on X.

"The statements made by President Trump on Truth Social regarding the Pope were entirely inappropriate and disrespectful," said Barron, bishop of Winona-Rochester and founder of the Word on Fire media nonprofit. While acknowledging his prior cooperation with the administration on religious liberty issues, he warned that "serious Catholics" should pursue structured dialogue with the Vatican rather than public confrontation. Barron added pointedly: "All that said, I think the President owes the Pope an apology."

Pope Leo XIV speaks to reporters aboard the papal flight from Rome to Algeria April 13, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Even traditionally conservative Catholic advocacy groups voiced unease.

John Yep, president of the conservative movement Catholics for Catholics that campaigned to elect Trump in 2024, said in a phone call with National Catholic Reporter that his initial reaction to Trump's post was one of "sadness," a feeling he said "was further validated" by the many messages against Trump's attack that the organization received.

"Catholics worked very hard to elect President Trump as we believed he was the candidate that was most in line with Catholic teaching. And this post from President Trump is not just a one off. This follows on the heels of just a general direction of unnecessary animosity towards the pope, who has been rightly speaking up about the injustice of this Iran conflict," he said.

When asked whether this would affect future political support, including for Trump-backed candidates in the upcoming midterm elections, Yep said that "the role of a Catholic is not to accept whatever position the current candidate that you favor says. We have to be speaking up regardless, because we take our cue from Jesus Christ, and when it comes time for the ballot box, we will make our decisions there about who is best to support."

Catholic League president Bill Donohue specifically criticized the AI imagery associated with the president's post, saying, "Trump does not help his case by posing as Jesus blessing a bedridden man; he released this Truth Social picture after he criticized Leo. It is offensive and immature." Donohue asked for a refocus on shared priorities between church and state, including religious liberty, adding, "Let's pray the latter prove to be controlling."

After receiving a McDonald’s DoorDash delivery April 13 while promoting a "no tax on tips" law, Trump denied there was any reference to Jesus in the AI-created image he shared, telling reporters the image depicted him as a doctor.

According to NBC News, he admitted he had posted the picture which he said showed him in a medical role connected to the Red Cross. He also criticized interpretations of it, arguing that only "fake news media" would draw those conclusions.

He said the image was intended to represent him as a doctor helping to "make people better."

The president added that he does not intend to apologize to the pope for his Truth Social post, reiterating that "Pope Leo said things that were wrong. He was very much against what I'm doing with regard to Iran."

"He's weak on crime. He went public. I'm just responding to Pope Leo. There's nothing to apologize for," he said.

International church leaders also had pointed responses to Trump's initial criticisms of the pope. Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, president of the Italian Bishops' Conference and Pope Francis' former peace envoy to Moscow, Beijing and Washington, D.C., expressed "regret" over the episode while reaffirming full support for the papacy. Zuppi stressed in his statement that the pope is "not a political counterpart, but the Successor of Peter, called to serve the Gospel, truth, and

peace." Zuppi also underscored the broader context of global instability, noting that the church's voice remains "a forceful call to the dignity of the person, to dialogue, and to responsibility."

Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro*, undersecretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education, wrote on X that Trump's attack on the pontiff was "a declaration of impotence" that betrayed a deep unease in the American president.

"When political power lashes out against a moral voice, it's because it cannot contain it," Spadaro said. "Trump doesn't debate Leo: he begs him to retreat into a language that he can dominate. But the Pope speaks another language, one that refuses to be reduced to the grammar of force, of security, of national interest."

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>
> — John Yep, president of Catholics for Catholics
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Religious women's orders also weighed in, emphasizing solidarity with the pope and condemnation of violence and division in public discourse. Sisters of Charity President Sister Donna Dodge described the episode as deeply troubling. "I don't even have words to express my feelings," she said, calling Trump's "continued misuse of religious language for political theater and public spectacle." She characterized the use of Jesus' imagery as "blasphemous, profane, sacrilegious, offensive," arguing that sacred symbols "point us to repentance, to humility, to justice, mercy, love of neighbor."

"The world does not need more spectacle. It needs more courage and compassion and it needs leaders who understand that reverence for God is shown not in performance, but in how we treat one another," she told NCR.

The Dominican Sisters of Peace said in a statement they "stand in solidarity with all people of goodwill — those of the Christian faith and others who, like us, pray and work for peace. We stand especially with our Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, Shepherd of our Universal Church, as he faithfully proclaims Christ's Gospel of peace."

Religious leaders weren't the only ones to speak up against the president's remarks.

On the social media platform X, the Democratic Party wrote that Trump is "picking fights with the Catholic Church and the pope instead of doing anything to make your life better, lower the cost of living, or bring our troops home. America deserves better."

"Donald Trump shamefully attacked His Holiness Pope Leo XIV. People of faith will never worship a wannabe King," U.S. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-NY, wrote April 13 on X.

"As a Catholic, I find it abhorrent that the President of the United States would publicly attack the Successor of St. Peter. Donald Trump is flailing," U.S. Sen. Mark Kelly, D-Arizona wrote on Facebook. Kelly added that Trump will "attack anyone or anything to try to protect himself, even the Church that millions of Americans find faith and comfort in every day."

"Last week, the president threatened to end a civilization. Now, he's attacking the Pope and posting an image of himself as Jesus. Not American. Not Christian. Not presidential," said Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, who is considered a potential Democratic candidate for the 2028 presidential election.

But it wasn't just progressive Democrats bashing Trump. A few of the president's former allies in the Make America Great Again political movement also took to social media to criticize Trump.

"On Orthodox Easter, President Trump attacked the Pope because the Pope is rightly against Trump's war in Iran and then he posted this picture of himself as if he is replacing Jesus," wrote former U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Green, a conservative Republican from Georgia who has broken with Trump on a host of issues.

Commenting on X, Green added: "I completely denounce this and I'm praying against it!!!"

Writing on X, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian took the opportunity, "on behalf of the great nation of Iran," to condemn Trump's insults and to "declare that the desecration of Jesus (peace be upon him), the Prophet of peace and brotherhood, is

unacceptable to any free person."

Pedro Sánchez, prime minister of Spain, wrote on X that "while some sow the world with wars, Leo XIV sows peace, with bravery and courage." Leo is scheduled to make a weeklong apostolic journey to Spain June 6-12.

Sánchez added: "It will be an honor to receive him in Spain in a few weeks."

**This story has been updated with new reaction from Trump at White House on Monday. It also corrects Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro's name.*