



Sen. J.D. Vance, R-Ohio, speaks with attendees at the 2023 Turning Point Action Conference at the Palm Beach County Convention Center in West Palm Beach, Florida. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

July 17, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

I like converts. Really, I do. St. Augustine, St. John Henry Newman and Ferdinand Brunetière were all converts and all three made important contributions to the societies in which they lived and to the church they joined by converting.

Sen. J.D. Vance is no Augustine. Newman's and Brunetière's places in intellectual history are secure. The latter two also distinguished themselves by the profundity of their criticisms of cultural liberalism. Augustine's honest appraisal of human nature and original sin played an indirect role, via Calvinism, in shaping the founding fathers' commitment to limiting the amount of power any one person or interest could grasp.

Vance is a young man but there is nothing profound in his embrace of postliberal ideas. Becoming the running mate of Donald Trump, whose contempt for liberal, democratic norms is his distinguishing characteristic, only makes it less likely Vance could become an important thinker.

In 2021, Vance attended the Napa Institute's annual gathering of conservative Catholic plutocrats. He had a public conversation with Brian Burch, president of [CatholicVote](#), the right-wing organization that engaged in [geofencing at Catholic Masses](#), grabbing people's cellphone information while they worshiped in order to cross-check it with voter rolls. It is difficult to imagine a tactic that is more offensive to both Catholic ideas about the sacraments and American ideas about privacy and religious liberty.

In one part of the discussion, Vance wondered about how, as a new Catholic who is in the public square, he should address issues when he thinks the pope is doing something wrong. Then the conversation turned weird.

[Tweet this](#)

The Napa conversation was odd. On the one hand, Vance is easygoing and always fluent. He made a joke about not being judged for drinking water as well as wine during the conversation, noting he had a redeye flight and avoiding dehydration was essential. His explanation for why he wrote his bestseller [Hillbilly Elegy](#) was

astonishingly self-serving. Vance shared a conversation he had with Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, about how he and Vance had to work their way into the upper reaches of power, a story that unintentionally went a long way toward explaining Thomas' evident sense of entitlement. He gave a shout-out to [Dominican Fr. Dominic Legge](#) who, like Vance, has a law degree.

Asked about his reasons for converting, Vance said there were several. First, he liked the fact that the church was "really old," and could serve as a ballast against all that was wrong with the modern world. Second, he liked the fact that the church "had stood really strong on some of the core moral issues," citing pro-life concerns.

Vance noted that as he tried to think through what it meant to be a serious Christian, he found Catholics to be among his most important interlocutors.

In one part of the discussion, Vance wondered about how, as a new Catholic who is in the public square, he should address issues when he thinks the pope is doing something wrong. You expected him to explain his differences with Pope Francis over climate change or migration.

Instead, the conversation turned weird. Vance mentioned the pope's actions to regulate the traditional Latin Mass. Why would he think that as a candidate for the U.S. Senate he should use the public platform his candidacy affords him to voice any opinion on a liturgical matter? Will he ask the GOP to amend its platform to include a pro-Tridentine rite plank?

OK — that would be bizarre and it's not going to happen. But it is true that some of Vance's running buddies in the Catholic integralist movement actually think governmental power should be used to enforce canon law. I discussed this [in my review](#) of Kevin Vallier's book [\*All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism\*](#).

Advertisement

To be sure, the fact that Vance attended a conference of integralists and those with an ideological affinity for [postliberal iterations of conservatism](#) doesn't mean we can pin every craziness uttered by Harvard professor [Adrian Vermeule](#) or First Things editor [Rusty Reno](#) on the new vice presidential candidate. But it is fair to ask how and why his postliberal views differ from theirs.

That line of questioning leads to the more important questions and they have nothing to do with Vance's Catholicism, at least not necessarily. How do postliberal visions manifest themselves in what is still a liberal constitutional order without overturning important checks on power or, put differently, how does one swear to uphold the Constitution while evidencing what Pepperdine University scholar Jason Blakely [correctly identified](#) as a "visceral disgust for the liberal tradition"?

While it is true that Catholics believe the common good should serve as a check on private interests, where in Catholic teaching does the common good [ignore the human dignity of migrants](#)? Where in Catholic teaching is government coercion permitted to [shut down religious charitable activities](#)?

It is strange to listen to Vance pose as an anti-elitist. Nothing screams "anti-elite" like a law degree from Yale, a stint in Silicon Valley, and a New York Times bestseller. And some of his criticisms of elite, liberal culture ring true. All Catholics should be willing to engage anyone who is willing to join the fight against the reign of neoliberalism and libertarianism.

But then Vance [endorses Bitcoin](#) and you have to ask yourself, "Would Augustine endorse Bitcoin?" The anti-elite populism may not be comprehensive, but is it authentic, or is it simply a ticket on the only gravy train in Republican Party politics today?

Most importantly for those of us who police the estuary where religion and politics collide, for all his talk about the importance of faith in the lives of real people and real communities, will there be an issue or a moment in which Vance's newly found Catholicism leads him to challenge his party or his running mate? If you think the answer is yes, I have some Bitcoin to sell you.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)