

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



Pope Francis speaks about the role of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the world during his general audience in St. Peter's Square, Oct. 9, 2024, at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)



Kiera Butler

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Over the weekend, the Vatican announced serious complications in the recovery of Pope Francis. The 88-year-old pontiff, who has been hospitalized for 10 days, is battling pneumonia and on Sunday also appeared to be in the early stages of kidney failure, the Vatican [said](#).



(NCR graphic/Angie Von Slaughter)

Throughout the world, mainstream Catholic leaders responded to the news with [prayers](#) for the pope's healing. But for some U.S. members of the ascendant Catholic traditionalist movement, Francis' decline presented an opportunity to criticize him and demand that the Vatican reverse course on what they see as a dangerous tack to the left. Some leaders in those circles took to social media to spread their messages — along with conspiracy theories that accused the ailing pope of being part of a criminal alliance and secretly fathering a child.

Traditionalist Catholics — sometimes called "trad Caths" on social media — advocate for the church, which is the largest denomination within Christianity with approximately 1.3 billion members worldwide, to return to the time before the modernizing influences of Vatican II. In the early 1960s, Pope John XXIII led a series of reforms, including instructing priests to conduct mass in the language of their community rather than Latin and to face the congregation rather than turning away. Crucially, Vatican II also emphasized racial and ethnic diversity as beneficial to the church, denounced antisemitism, and encouraged harmonious relationships with other faiths.

Critics of these sweeping changes have been grumbling for decades, but the papacy of Francis, the first Jesuit pope and the most socially liberal one since Vatican II, appears to have reenergized them. Traditionalists have railed against Francis' progressive views, which include support for the fight against [climate change](#) and strong [opposition](#) to rampant consumerism. Francis also [permitted](#) priests to bless LGBTQ Catholics (though he didn't sanction gay marriage and once used a [slur](#) to refer to gay priests).

When Francis [spoke out](#) against the revival of the Latin Mass in 2021 because he believed it represented "the peril of division" in the church, the traditionalist floodgates opened. In the Catholic journal *One Peter Five*, traditionalist writer Mark Nowakowski [called](#) the pope "a father who vacillates between abuse, tyrannical overreach, being absent, and then some moments of tenderness or apparent resolve, followed by gaslighting masquerading as mercy." In a *New York Times* [op-ed](#), *National Review* writer Brendan Michael Dougherty accused Francis of "tearing the Catholic Church apart." Last year, historian Massimo Faggioli, author of a biography of Francis, called the pope's tensions with traditionalist American critics "unprecedented." He [told](#) *Newsweek*, "It started immediately after his election, and there was a clear sense that this pope was really different from the previous ones."

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In the last few years, traditionalists have become not only increasingly vocal, but also politically ascendant. Today, prominent American traditionalists include conservative pundit Candace Owens, right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos, and former Trump strategist Steve Bannon.

Vice President JD Vance isn't technically a traditionalist; his school of Catholic thought is influenced more by intellectuals like political theorist Patrick Deneen and journalist Sohrab Ahmari, who characterize themselves as being part of the post-liberal movement. As the National Catholic Register [reports](#), post-liberal thought emphasizes "stability, nationalism, and communal duty" over personal freedoms. Yet Vance has [expressed support](#) for some traditionalist values, such as a return to the Latin Mass. As Kathryn Joyce wrote in a 2022 Mother Jones [article](#), traditionalist Catholics are quickly becoming the "ideological center of the Christian right." (Traditionalists are not to be confused with another conservative force in the Catholic Church, Opus Dei, a controversial yet powerful institution that emphasizes personal sacrifice and holds that everyone should strive for sainthood.)

On Sunday (Feb. 23), in a [statement](#) rife with unfounded allegations, Italian former Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, who served as an apostolic nuncio to the United States during the papacy of notoriously conservative Pope Benedict XVI, called Francis "a corrupt and maneuverable character" and an "emissary of globalism." Viganò, who was [excommunicated](#) last year after the Vatican accused him of trying to create a schism within the church, alleged that Francis was working with "an international criminal alliance," including members of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, to unseat Benedict XVI, who had stepped down in 2013 because of age and poor health. (No pope had resigned in more than 600 years.) He also suggested without evidence that Francis was "already deceased," had sexually abused children in Argentina, and was secretly the father of a boy who had died in 2014. Viganò posted a link to the statement on X, where he has 91,000 followers, and it was then reposted by prominent traditionalist Catholic accounts, including that of podcaster and author Taylor Marshall, who has 198,000 followers.



File photo of Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, speaking at the fall general assembly of the U.S. bishops' conference in Baltimore Nov. 11, 2019. The Holy See Press Office announced Nov. 11, 2023, that Pope Francis has removed Bishop Strickland from the pastoral governance of the Diocese of Tyler. (OSV News/CNS file photo/Bob Roller)

On Monday, Joseph Strickland, who was removed in 2023 from his post as a bishop in Tyler, Texas, after he repeatedly [criticized](#) Francis, [urged](#) his 231,000 followers on X to "prayerfully review" an [article](#) from the traditionalist site LifeSiteNews about Francis' successor. The article warned, "If a candidate similar to Francis, or one with even more extreme views, were elected, it could have grave consequences, potentially leading many souls astray through false doctrine." In 2022, Strickland had promoted a video produced by Michael Matt, editor of the traditionalist publication the Remnant, who referred to Francis as a "diabolically disoriented clown." Strickland referred to former President Joe Biden, who is Catholic, as "[evil](#)" and [spoke](#) at a "Stop the Steal" rally in 2020.

Matt, the Remnant editor, shared his thoughts about Francis' illness last week (Feb. 22) in a [post](#) to his 51,000 followers on X. "Some have asked the question: Are we obligated to pray for a quick and full recovery of Pope Francis?" he wrote. "I would answer that question with another question: Why would we pray for God to grant Francis more time on this earth to reset the Church in the image and likeness of Globalism?"

Other traditionalist Catholics stopped short of actually criticizing Francis as he declined but instead issued oblique calls for him to repent. In a since-deleted tweet, podcaster Marshall asked his followers to "pray a Rosary for him to die in the arms of Jesus with the true faith and charity in his heart."

On Monday, the Vatican announced that the pope had shown some slight improvement and was working from the hospital. On Sunday, he [posted](#) a message on X to his 18.4 million followers: "I urge you to continue your apostolate with joy and to be a sign of a love that embraces everyone," he wrote. "Do not be afraid to take risks for love!"