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Donald Trump accused of ‘manipulating’ Catholic bishops for political gain

Archbishop of Milwaukee says White House exploited clerics in Oval Office photo

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The White House's release of a video showing a dozen Catholic clerics praying over US President Donald Trump in the Oval Office has sent shockwaves through the Catholic hierarchy © The White House

Amy Kazmin in Rome and James Politi in Washington

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Donald Trump’s relations with the Catholic Church have hit a fresh low, with the White House accused of “manipulating” a group of bishops to create the impression of a political endorsement ahead of the midterms.

The release last week of a video of a dozen Catholic clerics praying over the president in the Oval Office sent shockwaves through US Catholic hierarchy, which has been highly critical of many of Trump’s policies.

Archbishop of Milwaukee Jeffrey Grob, who was at the meeting, has expressed regret for attending and accused the White House of exploiting the clerics for political gain.

Grob said the meeting — organised by the conservative Heritage Foundation — was billed as a chance for bishops to hold private talks with senior White House staff about issues of importance to the [Catholic Church](#), including immigration and religious worker visas.

After the discussions with White House policy advisers, Grob said the bishops were led into the Oval Office, greeted by [Trump](#) and “directed to stand behind him and pray”. But he said bishops never gave consent for photos to be publicly released, nor were they aware that they had also been videotaped.



Catholic Archbishops and Bishops pray with President Trump in the Oval Office 

pic.twitter.com/facV5wTGQQ

— Margo Martin (@MargoMartin47) [October 22, 2026](#)

“The meeting was in no way an endorsement of the president and his policies,” Grob said. “I feel a heavy sadness, not only over the pain I caused, but also for the fact that something so sacred to a group of religious leaders, prayer to our Heavenly Father, would be manipulated in that way.”

The meeting comes as Catholics, Latinos in particular, have soured on Trump’s approach to immigration and the cost of living, and after Chicago-born Pope Leo XIV has openly clashed with the president over his war in Iran and his harsh crackdown on immigrants.

William Joensen, the bishop of the Diocese of Des Moines, also apologised on Monday night for creating the appearance of a political endorsement. Joensen said that while Catholic clerics are often called on to engage with politicians whose positions are not aligned with Catholic teaching, he should have been more prudent before visiting the White House so close to the midterm elections.

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“I wish I had been more shrewd . . . like those who exploited our meeting for partisan political purposes,” Joensen wrote.

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James Golka, the archbishop of Denver, who laid hands on Trump during prayer, told the Denver Catholic newspaper that he was “heartbroken” at how the meeting had been seen.

“I understand that many people saw the video posted by the administration 12 days before an election as an endorsement,” he said. “That was never my intention.”

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The White House defended Trump’s relationship with Catholics.

“There has never been a greater president for Catholic Americans than President Trump, and his strong record proves it: he stopped the weaponisation of the federal government against Christians, proudly defended and expanded our religious rights, pardoned pro-life activists, stopped the chemical mutilation of our nation’s children, and protected parents’ rights,” Taylor Rogers, a White House spokesperson, said in a statement.

In the 2024 presidential election, Trump won 55 per cent of the Catholic vote, compared with 43 per cent for Kamala Harris, according to the Pew Research Center.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops distanced itself from the White House meeting, saying it has not been involved. The group has urged US voters to “reject rhetoric that appeals to fear, resentment or division” in the midterms.

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The Vatican has not commented on the matter, but relations between Pope Leo and Trump [remained strained](#) since the president called the pope “terrible” after the pontiff slammed Washington’s bombing of Iran.

Analysts condemned Trump’s photo op as “desperate” ahead of elections in which he is expected to lose Catholic support.

“If you say to them that it is a private prayer, and a private meeting and then you use it for your electoral goals, it means you are pretty desperate,” [Massimo Franco](#), author of the book *Popes, Dollars and Wars: The Power of America in the Vatican from the Taboos of the Past to Leo XIV*, said of the administration’s conduct.

“It means you really have great troubles: you know that the vote of the Catholics cannot be taken for granted any more,” he added.

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