

Conservative Catholics Take Stage in Rome, Looking to Shape the Church

In lavish halls, days before a conclave will select a new pope, power brokers came together for a mix of devotion, activism, money and socializing.



By [Elizabeth Dias](#)

Elizabeth Dias, the national religion correspondent for The Times, reported from palaces and churches in Rome for this article.

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The European nobles and politicians arrived in the gardens of Palazzo Brancaccio in gowns and tuxedos, ready for aperitivi with the Catholic power brokers and pilgrims from America.

Spritzes by the grand fountain progressed to entrees inside the palace, beef cheek cooked at a low temperature and served on orange potato velouté.

Brian Burch, President Trump’s nominee to be ambassador to the Holy See, dined at a head table next to Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis, the German aristocrat who [befriended Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr.](#), and alongside current and former members of hard-right European political parties. One of them, Antonio Giordano, a member of the Italian Parliament in Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s party, welcomed the several hundred guests to Rome, and discussed their shared “urgency of protecting the family.”

“Only together we can effectively conquer the demographic winter,” he said, nodding to low birthrates and a push for pronatalist policies.

After dessert, the guests followed the sound of live music up a marble staircase into salons lined with tapestries and lit with chandeliers. Eyes popped at the vast hall of mirrors, designed in tribute to Versailles. A gilded ballroom had walls stretching up 45 feet.

Image



Brian Burch, President Trump's nominee to be ambassador to the Holy See.

Credit...

Jacquelyn Martin/Associated Press

And then they waltzed.

It was, after all, the first-ever “America Week Ball.”

Officially, the Catholic church was in a nine-day period of mourning following Pope Francis' funeral. But in Rome, by happenstance of previous scheduling — or by divine providence, as some organizers believe — what has come to be called “America Week” was also taking place.

An annual elite fund-raising week for Catholic projects, America Week is largely led by influential conservative Catholic organizations that are united in their commitment to advancing traditional principles concerning marriage, faith and family.

It started in connection with the Papal Foundation, a U.S.-based charity that raises millions of dollars for Vatican projects through donations that start at seven figures.

This year, though, many participants have come to Rome to raise money for new groups, hoping to replicate in Europe the success that conservative Catholics have had in expanding their political and cultural influence in the United States.

While the cardinals spent their days in a conference room at the Vatican, contemplating who should be their next pope, hundreds of American Catholics and their European allies mingled at private galas like the ball, and made exclusive pilgrimages to some of Rome's finest palaces, hotels and churches.

No matter what happens at the conclave, these politically engaged American conservatives are expanding their networks and institutions and investing in their long-term plans to shape the church's future.

"The Europeans very much want to learn about philanthropy, and how we do these things, how we help groups, how we raise money, how we define what is a worthy apostolate, what is not," said Mark Randall, an executive director for the Pontifical North American College, an American seminary in Rome.

The ball was one such new attempts to bring all these players together to network and build friendships. It was sponsored by a newly created organization, the Louis IX Foundation, which was formed by a trio of Americans including Mr. Burch. It is named after a 13th century king of France and leader of the Seventh Crusade, who mobilized western military and financial aid to defend Christendom in the east.

"He was a great reformer and restorer of the faith, supporter of many good things, just like we are trying to do," said Mr. Randall, who helped start the group.

Some America Week events were canceled because of Francis' death, and several church leaders declined invitations, citing the period of mourning. Others proceeded, especially as they were connected to the Jubilee Year — a rare Catholic tradition in which sins are forgiven — with leaders praying for the coming conclave and hoping for a pope who would help advance their goals.

The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, a policy group that endorses free-market economics, held a conference for entrepreneurs. The world's largest Catholic news organization, EWTN, hosted a dinner on the roof of the Waldorf Astoria. Film producers spoke with philanthropists about potential projects.

The NAPA Institute, a conservative Catholic-oriented network, led a "once in a lifetime" pilgrimage for the Jubilee Year, in which guests stayed at the Hotel de Russie and had a private dinner with Cardinal James Harvey at the garden outside his residence to honor his 50 years as a priest. Cardinal Harvey is one of the 10 American cardinals with a vote in electing the next pope.

Image



Cardinal James Michael Harvey attended a mourning Mass for Pope Francis at St. Peter's Basilica on May 1.

Credit...

Remo Casilli/Reuters

The Francis papacy created a sense of urgency for many conservative American Catholics who believed that progressive values were undermining church doctrine, and fueled their efforts to bolster lay organizations to defend their faith. They were particularly concerned about Francis' decision to allow priests to bless couples in same-sex relationships.

"If the pope or anyone crosses the line with the magisterium, you have to push back," said Tim Busch, president of the NAPA Institute, referring to the church's teaching authority on morals and faith. "You can't take over the hierarchical control of church, but you can be outspoken, and hold the line on magisterium."

Pope Francis, he said, "walked right up the red line, but didn't cross it."

Several of the Americans had private meetings with cardinals while they were in Rome, when the cardinals had breaks from their pre-conclave meetings. Some leading American conservatives consider Cardinal Peter Erdo of Hungary a preferable choice for the next pope. He also has the support of the prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban, and was supported by Cardinal George Pell of Australia, who died in 2023.

“He’s what we need right now,” Mr. Busch said. “We need someone who can teach clearly and be strong.”

The events drew some of the most outspoken defenders of traditionalist Catholicism and right-wing politics, both in the U.S. and Europe, reflecting a growing alliance of ascendant populism that is energized by Christian fervor.

At the ball were Americans like Steve Cortes, a former Trump campaign adviser who works with Catholic Vote, as well as Europeans like Margarita de la Pisa Carrión, a Spanish European Parliament member of the hard-right political party Vox.

One of the young men waltzing was Alexander Tschugguel, a Catholic convert from Austria who became a hero to many conservatives in 2019 when he stole statues of Pachamama, a fertility goddess, that were welcomed by Pope Francis during meetings with Amazon leaders. Outraged by what he and other conservatives saw as idol worship, Mr. Tschugguel traveled to Rome, took the statues from a chapel at dawn, and tossed them into the Tiber River. (Pope Francis apologized for the incident, and the statues were recovered.)

The week’s mix of devotion, activism, money and socializing works to create particularly strong ties, with an eye toward expansive global reach for the long term. After the ball, while some attendees stayed to waltz, others strategized or flirted over cigars and cocktails, or went to nighttime Eucharistic adoration at the Chiesa di San Gioacchino in the Prati neighborhood.

The night before the ball, another group held a three-course dinner reception at the Villa Agrippina Gran Meliá, a luxury hotel with panoramic views of Rome. A main funder for both that dinner and the ball was Declan Ganley, an Irish businessman and prominent anti-abortion activist.

One influential and emerging group with a presence at the dinner was the French Riviera Institute, started by Msgr. Dominique Rey, a French bishop who is a hero to many traditionalist Catholics and who resigned from his bishopric at the Vatican’s request last year.

The group’s goal is to organize a network of influential European leaders across all parts of society “to amplify and intensify the Christian Renewal throughout Europe,” in hopes of making significant advances by the 2,000th anniversary of the resurrection of Christ in 2033. A similar group is starting in Mexico.

Their hope is to repeat the success of the NAPA Institute, which has become a force for conservative Catholic political and cultural influence in the United States.

A month before the U.S. presidential election, Mr. Burch went to Monaco for an invitation-only meeting for entrepreneurs and leaders. He is the co-founder of Catholic Vote, a conservative Catholic organization that [mobilized voters for Mr. Trump in 2024](#).

Before boarding his flight to Europe last fall, he said in an interview that the gathering brought together like-minded Catholic Vote-type groups that were “imagining that the stars are going to

align between European politics and U.S.” as populism rose in Europe. He alluded to the planned ball in Rome, and hoped to involve a future Vice President JD Vance.

Mr. Burch has not yet been confirmed by the Senate. He was already planning to attend America Week before he was nominated, and he attended the events as a pilgrim and private citizen, not in any official capacity, according to event organizers. At his confirmation hearing, he assured the committee that “I fully understand the distinction between advocacy and diplomacy.”

till, his pending ambassadorship is a symbol of the rising strength of the conservative American Catholicism in the post-Francis era. .

“Obviously, once he is cleared, he will be a major, major player in the ball in the next year, and going forward, as the ambassador,” Mr. Randall said.

Elizabeth Dias is The Times’s national religion correspondent, covering faith, politics and values.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/06/us/conclave-pope-conservative-catholics.html>