

## Michelangelo, Mussolini, and Mary in Marble: Fascism, Catholicism, and the Modern American TradCath Movement

On April 20, 2025, Vice President J.D. Vance had a short, private meeting with Pope Francis, roughly two months after Francis had publicly castigated the Trump administration's policies in general, and directly negated Vance's interpretation of the *ordo amoris* in particular. On April 21, Francis died, an event which Twitter user @JoePostingg rationalized as "meeting JD Vance probably drained the Pope's will to live." Vance is an adult convert—it was only in 2019 that he found Catholicism and, through his subsequent affiliation with certain circles of Catholic intelligentsia, the reactionary authoritarian "postliberal" movement. An increased ultraconservative Catholic presence in Trump's second administration is inextricably linked to an accelerated far-right overhaul of the federal government, which began in January with Elon Musk, antiquity-obsessed "tech bro" and then-head of DOGE, making and laughing off a gesture he termed a "Roman salute."

The strength of popular interest in ancient Rome is aided quite significantly by the emphasis on Roman antiquity in schools and pop culture, and the reconstructed past visible and tourable in Rome itself. In particular, Mussolini's myriad demolition and construction projects to position himself as the head of a new Roman Empire rewrote the city itself to be a testament to former imperial glory and his own greatness, a visual thesis that was left comparatively unchallenged in the aftermath of WWII. In present-day America, some of our most powerful people act at the intersection of 1) fascist rhetoric, 2) asking how many times a day someone thinks about the Roman Empire, as a means of cosplaying both seriousness and intellectualism, and 3) making Christianity safe in this country again.

This paper will begin with a historical treatment of the visual rhetoric of Augustus' construction projects and the establishment of a Roman rhetoric of urban design, before comparing Michelangelo's reorientation of the Capitoline Hill to Mussolini's reconstruction of imperial Rome and development of the Via della Conciliazione, drawing on the work of Joshua Arthurs, Paul Baxa, and Kathleen Lamp, who create establish not only a functional "road map" of Roman construction projects linked to fascism, but also a framework for the tradition of visual epideictic. The paper will then turn to the rise of fascist rhetoric in American politics of the last decade and situate the uncritical generation of Roman references alongside the rise of ultraconservative adult converts seeking a religious justification for their political mores, with a brief conceptual framing of prior Christofascist relationships in Italy in and after WWII from Jan Nelis' book *Catholicism and Fascism in Europe 1918-1945*, adding to the research of Madeline Studebaker's work on growing organizations that tie together fascism and Christianity and Michael Barkun's work on the rise of the religious right and the Christian Identity movement. It will also include basic explanations of the religious leanings of Trump's cabinet members, with a focus on postliberal conservatism and neo-integralist Catholic beliefs.

In doing so, it will explore the modern American alt-right fascination with the pagan Roman Empire and its historical, paradoxical relationship to the right-wing adult Catholic converts in its base, who convert to preserve "traditional values" while decrying long-established key doctrine, such as papal infallibility, when it contradicts their previously-held political opinions created and argued in the American, not global, context. Using literary and rhetorical analysis, this paper will explain the sometimes-symbiotic, sometimes-parasitic nature of the Catholic Church's relationship to pagan Rome and political power.

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