

[News](#)



Republican Sen. JD Vance of Ohio speaks at a June 16 event held by the national conservative political movement, "Turning Point," in Detroit. The vice presidential candidate, a Catholic convert, supports massive immigrant deportations and tariffs to protect American industries. (OSV News/Reuters/Rebecca Cook)



by Peter Feuerherd

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

September 23, 2024

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

Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, 20th-century converts, shook up an emerging American Catholic Church.

[Day](#) brought a zest for socialist and pacifist views with the Catholic Worker she co-founded in New York. [Merton](#), the Trappist monk, wrote passionately for Black civil rights and warnings on nuclear destruction from his hermitage in rural Kentucky.

In this century, famous American Catholic converts often have a different focus.

Ohio Senator JD Vance is a Catholic convert who is emerging as a prime promoter of MAGA Republicanism, arguing for massive immigrant [deportations](#) and [tariffs](#) to protect American industries. He has also criticized [childless women](#) in general and school teachers in particular. (He was not taught by nuns).

Vance is not alone. The roster of prominent contemporary American Catholic converts reads like a "Who's Who" of MAGA and conservative thinkers, advocates, and cultural figures. They include former House Speaker and current Fox News commentator [Newt Gingrich](#); social media influencer [Candace Owens](#); comedian Rob Schneider; New York Times columnist Ross Douthat and actor [Shia LaBeouf](#).

'There's a sense that the church is able to provide moral order in their lives.'

—Dominican Fr. Raymond La Grange

[Tweet this](#)

Many, but not all, support the Trump-Vance ticket. Some, such as former trade chief Robert Lighthizer, were a part of the first Trump administration and may land a spot in a potential second Trump tenure. Canadian philosopher [Jordan Peterson](#), a social media critic popular in young male North American circles, is said to be on the cusp of conversion, following the example of his wife, Tammy.

[A recent New York Times column](#) by Matthew Schmitz, also a convert, described modern newcomers to Catholicism as a galvanizing intellectual force in today's Republican Party, moving the conservative movement towards an economic policy more attuned to the concerns of workers and to culture war values.

Not all Catholic converts are happy with the trend.

"It's really horrible," said Dawn Eden Goldstein, author and canon lawyer, describing what Vance's newfound prominence has meant for Catholic converts like herself. Eden Goldstein recently caused a social media storm on X when she advocated that Catholics vote for Kamala Harris, arguing that the Trump-Vance ticket posed a peculiar threat to democracy.

A longtime advocate for church teaching against abortion, gay marriage and the death penalty, Eden Goldstein in 2021 delivered a talk on Catholic traditionalist icon [G.K. Chesterton](#), where she addressed the British author's antisemitism. She said the reaction was not positive.



Dawn Eden Goldstein, raised in Reform Judaism, was baptized as a Catholic in 2006. (CNS/Deirdre McQuade)

"I adhere to Catholic teaching all the way down," she said. Raised in Reform Judaism, Eden Goldstein worries about an emerging antisemitism and opposition to immigrants she sees in traditionalist Catholic circles, despite Pope Francis' frequent calls for supporting migrants. Candace Owens, for one, has stoked controversy with arguments about [Jewish conspiracies](#) and downplaying Nazi atrocities and has found a fervent following in traditionalist Catholic circles after her recent conversion.

Eden Goldstein was baptized in 2006, when she was a copy editor at the New York Post and friends with what she described as the "National Review crowd," the opinion journal founded by conservative Catholic William Buckley. She later went on to work for the Cardinal Newman Society, a group dedicated to policing the orthodoxy of Catholic colleges, earned a degree in canon law, taught in seminary and wrote a bestseller extolling the virtues of [chastity](#).

But as devotion to Trumpism and opposition to Pope Francis began to emerge in Catholic conservative circles, Eden Goldstein felt estranged.

"I got out of that conservative Catholic world after Francis," she said, "I noticed a change."

Michelle Arnold, another convert, worked for Catholic Answers, a San Diego-based group devoted to defending church teaching. She left after decades as a writer for the organization explaining the church for inquirers, including potential converts.

"I was appalled by what happened when Trump came in," she said. Many in traditional Catholic circles, she said, embraced the former president as a messenger for their views against abortion, a political stance which culminated in the appointment of Supreme Court justices who overturned *Roe v. Wade*.



Newt Gingrich, former House Speaker and current Fox News commentator, is among the prominent contemporary American Catholic converts. He is pictured with his wife, Callista Gingrich, outgoing U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, as they greeted Pope Francis Jan. 15, 2021, at the Vatican. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

While the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a lengthy [guide for Catholic](#) voters in the past few election cycles, [Catholic Answers](#) responded with a short pamphlet highlighting what it described as "non-negotiables" on abortion, euthanasia and human cloning, among other moral concerns.

The pamphlet was popular in Catholic parishes, she said, and helped "shape a whole generation of Catholic voters in the United States" spreading a message that voting for Democrats was morally verboten.

While Vance and others are shaping the popular imagination of Catholic converts as aligned with MAGA ideology, parish leaders preparing faith seekers say that political ideology is mostly removed from the conversion process.

[David de la Fuente](#), director of the Order of Christian Initiation for Adults at St. Paul's Church in New York City, said that the West Side Manhattan parish counts on about 20 new converts entering the church, culminating in the sacramental rites at Easter. As a Paulist parish, a religious community devoted to evangelization, the church makes an effort to be welcoming, including social gatherings after Mass and parish groups including one for LGBTQ Catholics. Parishioners come from all over the metro area.

He estimated that about half the new potential adherents never were connected to a religious community before inquiring about Catholicism. Another half had a Christian background but fell away.



Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory baptizes Andre Gouyet during the Easter Vigil April 8, 2023, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington. (OSV News/Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada)

Their goal is not to embrace a political ideology but to find a rock to anchor their lives, he said.

Some come from a personal connection with a friend or family member at the church. Others, in a social media age, look up Catholicism online, said de la Fuente, who likes to quote theologian and Jesuit Cardinal Avery Dulles' book, [Models of the Church](#), to indicate that "Catholicism is really a big tent."

Occasionally, he said, potential converts come to St. Paul's uncomfortable with this broad sense of Catholicism. His response is to direct them to other parishes, such as St. Vincent Ferrer, a Dominican parish across town on the East Side.

Dominican Fr. Raymond La Grange, parochial vicar at [St. Vincent Ferrer](#), directs the conversion classes there. At age 30 he is often older than the converts he is teaching. As at St. Paul's, many come from non-religious backgrounds or from Protestant churches.

"There's a sense that the church is able to provide moral order in their lives," he said about those who come to St. Vincent's seeking conversion. Few are attracted by political ideology. There is little discussion of partisan politics or opposition to Francis, said La Grange, who said he keeps the focus on Jesus.

Internal church arguments have little interest to them.

"So many of those we get were not raised religious. They don't have something to rebel against. They don't have an ax to grind," said La Grange.



Shia LaBeouf, who portrayed St. Pio of Pietrelcina in the 2023 film "Padre Pio," converted to Catholicism. (OSV News/Gravitas Ventures)

Similar issues emerge far from coastal cities like New York.

Working out of Columbus, Ohio, [Patrick Madrid's Relevant Radio show](#), broadcast on scores of outlets around the country, is in regular contact with converts and potential converts.

As in much of talk radio, political issues do come up, but converts, he said, are attracted by other aspects of Catholic life.

"It's the beauty of Catholic things," he said, noting that aspects such as architecture, Gregorian chant and the church's teachings, as well as encounters with a kind priest, often provide "a strong point of conversion." This election year has been a challenge, he said. Madrid said he tries to avoid bombastic rhetoric popular in talk radio circles. But he has spoken out against IVF, opposed by the church because the process creates embryos which are frequently discarded.

The position is not popular with many listeners who have become part of the Trump-Vance political base. The former president has [promised](#) to provide government subsidies for IVF.

"A lot of people are putting their party first and Catholic moral teaching second," said Madrid.

[Related: Trump's running mate: Does JD Vance's conversion to Catholicism matter?](#)

The traditionalist surge may be developing in a vacuum, as progressive Catholic groups often don't focus on attracting converts. For example, Margaret Susan Thompson, an historian at Syracuse University, entered the church in 1984, sparked by the example of religious sisters she interviewed as part of a research project. She came to the conversion largely on her own, embracing what she described as a pro-feminist Catholicism.

She keeps in touch with other like-minded Catholics through social media and appreciates that the church attracts a wide breadth of followers.

"My room is a kind of progressive Catholicism. It's not the only room in the mansion," she said.

Eden Goldstein said there are positive aspects to the traditionalist surge in conversions. She, for one, was attracted to the literary interests of those interested in 20th-century British Catholic writers popular in some traditional Catholic circles.

Beyond the cultural attachments, embracing Catholicism can signal a rebellious spirit.

Both Merton and Day described their conversion to Catholicism as a shock to their secular Manhattan friends. Vance described his conversion as part of [joining the resistance](#), even as his political career has ascended.

Advertisement

By upholding church teaching in some circles, particularly on issues concerning abortion and sexuality, "You will find yourself a rebel, you will find yourself in the underground, " Eden Goldstein said.

But there should be a wider embrace of church teaching, she added.

"We have to be careful not to tar all conservatives with the same brush. At some level, we have to believe, if they are willing to cooperate, they will be disposed to truth. That's what happened to me," she said.

In a hyper partisan world, Catholicism still offers something different for converts.

"Catholicism is not about being on a team. It is about submitting one's life to God's and to the truth as it is proclaimed to us through the teaching office of the Catholic Church," said Eden Goldstein.