

How will Vance's Catholic faith affect him as VP?

written by OSV News |



Vice President-elect JD Vance's wife, Usha, a practicing Hindu, once told him that she believed his 2019 conversion to Catholicism "was good for you."

Reflecting on her assessment, Vance realized — as he recounted in a 2020 essay in *The Lamp* journal: "It was the Catholic part of my heart and mind that demanded that I think on the things that actually mattered."

A great many things will matter when Vance enters the West Wing of the White House to take office after he is sworn in Jan. 20. How might his Catholicism impact what he brings to a new Trump administration and the business of running America?

Vance's friend of several years, James Orr — an associate professor of philosophy of religion at Cambridge University and a founder of the U.K.'s National Conservative Movement — told OSV News that Vance "thinks very hard about the world, the geopolitical landscape and what America can do to ensure that it's as calm a landscape as possible."

Vacation visits and regular texts keep Vance and Orr in contact, and the two met for lunch in the U.S. Senate dining room shortly before Vance accepted the Republican Party's nomination for vice president.

"I did say to him, 'Your life is about to change forever,'" recalled Orr, "and he smiled."

“He’s shown immense courage, I think ... in setting out what he believes and what he thinks is in the interest of the American people,” Orr said. “If you look at the portfolio of policies that they are bringing to bear as we speak, it’s very hard to pigeonhole them as either left or right in the traditional sense that those of us who came to political awareness at the end of the 20th century would recognize.”

“This is a new kind of right-wing politics that takes social conservatism seriously,” Orr explained, “but also recognizes some battles that have been lost at the federal level are best returned to the state level as a matter of constitutional propriety.”

As to Vance’s Catholicism, Orr describes it as an asset — “an unqualified advantage” — for the vice presidential toolkit.

Nonetheless, “there is a separation of church and state, and it seems to me that while Vance’s Catholicism will have a leveling effect on vast waves of the new administration’s policy platform, it’s quite clear that he’s not directing everything to conform to his own private Catholic convictions,” he said.

That said, Orr doesn’t imagine a conflict in the first place.

“I doubt there would be any policies he would endorse that don’t have publicly justifiable reasons — that he couldn’t make a purely rational, agnostic, secular case for in the public square,” Orr emphasized. “But what it does mean is that you will have a vice president who has a coherent outlook on the world — not an outlook that is simply genuflecting to the latest fad that has emerged from some murky corner of identity politics.”

The Ohio-born Vance rarely attended church as a child, noting the grandmother who chiefly raised him — while a believer in Jesus — “loathed ‘organized religion.’” His father’s stance as a serious Pentecostal influenced his teen years, but as Vance wrote in *The Lamp*, “By the time I left the Marines in 2007 and began college at The Ohio State University, I read Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris and called myself an atheist.”

He later found himself connecting to Catholic doctrine — but still hesitated, admitting that “for many years I occupied the uncomfortable territory between curiosity about Catholicism and mistrust.” A Yale Law School graduate, Vance briefly practiced corporate law before entering the tech industry as a venture capitalist.

Vance garnered widespread attention with the publication of his 2016 memoir “Hillbilly Elegy,” later adapted as a film. In 2022, he was elected to the U.S. Senate, representing his home state.

Vance credits the support of priests from the Dominican order — and his wife — with his gradual but eventual conversion to Catholicism. He was baptized at the Dominican priory of St. Gertrude Church in Cincinnati by Dominican Father Henry Stephan, a chaplain at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

“I think it is safe to assume that his faith will in some way shape his politics,” said Stephen White, a fellow in the Catholic Studies Program at the Washington-based Ethics & Public Policy Center. “But I think there’s also a temptation to assume that his faith will determine his politics more than they actually do.”

White finds an analogy in the exit polls of the recent election.

“It’s clear that Catholics broke for (Donald) Trump in this election — but it’s not clear, exactly, that Catholics voted overwhelmingly for Trump for any reasons that are particularly Catholic,” explained White. “If it’s the economy and immigration, with some culture war stuff sprinkled in, you don’t necessarily have to be Catholic — or a faithful Catholic — to see how those issues might have favored Trump in this election.”

Issues of particular concern to many Catholics observing the new Trump administration include the still-developing policies of proposed mass deportation of immigrants and the potential insurer or government sponsorship of in vitro fertilization treatments.

On Nov. 12, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops — during its fall annual plenary assembly in Baltimore — declared the organization will “raise our voice loudly” if the basic human rights of immigrants are violated.

IVF is opposed by the Catholic Church because, in addition to other ethical and moral issues, it separates conception from sexual intercourse, and it frequently involves the destruction of human embryos.

Some Catholics were further disappointed President-elect Donald Trump seems unwilling to endorse the reinstatement of a nationwide abortion ban. Trump took credit for ending a federal right to abortion with the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2022 Dobbs ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*, returning the abortion issue to the states to enact restrictions on, or protections of, abortion access.

While these thorny policy matters could appear to pose a dilemma for the Catholic vice president-elect, James Patterson, an associate professor of politics at Ave Maria University, has a reminder.

“There’s going to be some pretty hard limits to what Vance can do upon the basis of his office,” he said. “The vice president doesn’t have a tremendous amount of constitutional authority.”

Rod Dreher — a columnist and American expat in Budapest, Hungary, with longtime ties to *The American Conservative* — is, like Orr, a friend of Vance. While Dreher did not respond to OSV News’ interview request, he spoke to Vance for *The American Conservative* immediately following his 2019 baptism — and has since had sharp words for those who question Vance’s convictions.

Dreher, who converted to Catholicism from Protestantism and later became Orthodox, wrote in a September Substack post that complains about Vance’s Catholicism from “liberal” Catholics focused on “that Vance draws some social and political conclusions from his Catholic faith that contradict what liberalism believes in the year 2024.”

He said those same people did not complain about President Joe Biden, also a Catholic, “bringing his faith convictions, such as they are, to bear on his politics,” suggesting a perceived double standard between Vance and the nation’s only other Catholic vice president — outgoing President Biden, who served from 2009 to 2017 as President Barack Obama’s vice president.

While reporters scramble for access and untold amounts of print and virtual ink continue to be

spilled predicting the outcomes of the approaching Trump administration — and Vance's role in it — one thing, perhaps, seems clearer.

“I think the question, ‘What happens after Trump?’ has been on a lot of people's minds for a long time,” White reflected. “And with Vance's role in this big victory in this election, I think we're closer to an answer of where that future might come from — or who might be shaping it.”