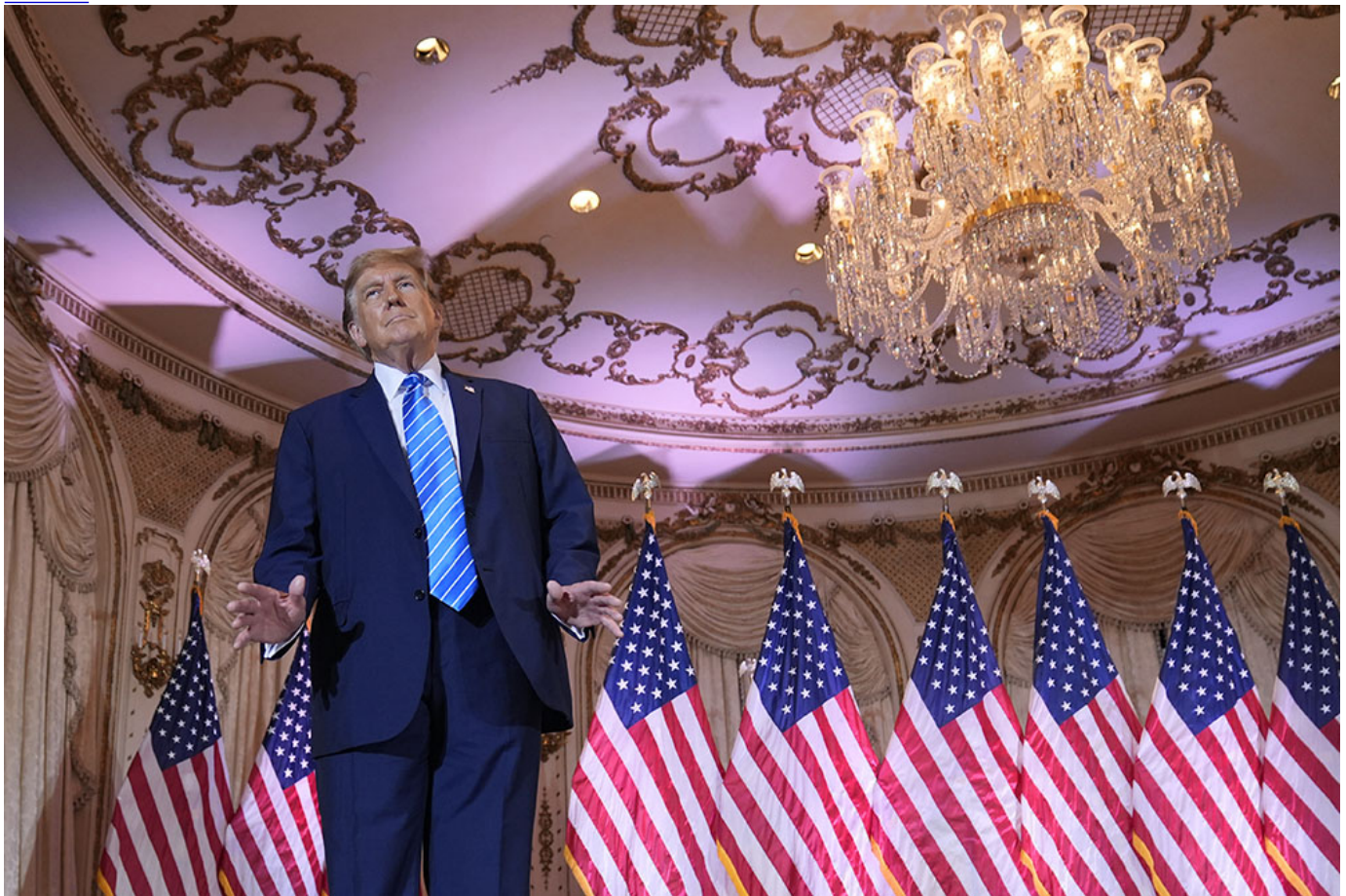




Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump arrives to speak at a Super Tuesday election night party March 5 at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida. (AP/Evan Vucci)



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Forming allegiances with so-called "alt-right" political leaders and promoting an unapologetic blend of Catholic doctrine and nationalism, a small nonprofit organization incorporated less than two years ago in Arizona has made a quick, outsized impact in the arena of Catholic political engagement.

Under the leadership of John Yep, a 39-year-old former Phoenix diocesan official who has said he spent 14 years discerning priesthood with the Legionaries of Christ, over the past year the group Catholics for Catholics has launched an aggressive multimedia operation consisting of blogs, podcasts and newsletters, while helping to organize [rallies](#) around the country that have drawn thousands of people.

Now in the midst of a presidential election year, Catholics for Catholics is poised to make its biggest splash yet by hosting a "[Catholic Prayer for Trump](#)" event at Mar-a-Lago, the resort in Palm Beach, Florida, that former President Donald Trump owns and has made his official residence since leaving the White House in 2021.

Advertised as a \$1,000-a-ticket black-tie event, the dinner program on March 19 features a speaker lineup of heavyweights on the political far right, such as Roger Stone, the conservative activist and self-described "dirty trickster," and retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who served briefly as Trump's national security adviser.

Other well-known speakers include the far-right activist and conspiracy theorist Jack Posobiec; Tim Ballard, the former CEO of Operation Underground Railroad; and Jim Caviezel, the actor who played Jesus in "The Passion of the Christ" and, more recently, Ballard in the 2023 film "Sound of Freedom."

Yep also hopes that Trump and former First Lady Melania Trump will attend the event.

In a [Feb. 29 video](#) promoting the Mar-a-Lago gathering, Yep introduced a letter inviting the Trumps to address the "group of Catholic leaders" and others who will gather for the event on March 19, the Solemnity of St. Joseph. The event's organizers are invoking St. Joseph's patronage of "the vast campaign of the Church against world Communism" that Pope Pius XI bestowed on the saint in his 1937 encyclical [Divini Redemptoris](#) ("On Atheistic Communism").

Reading from the letter, Yep said Trump was "the rightful winner" of the 2020 presidential election, echoing the former president's falsehoods that the election was "stolen" from him.

Also highlighting the importance of the "Catholic vote" in national elections, Yep said the event will make an "overdue bold proclamation" that Trump is "the only Catholic option for 2024."



A view of the Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida (Wikimedia Commons/Jud McCranie)

In a brief email exchange, Catholics for Catholics requested and received a list of written questions from NCR, but did not respond to the questions before this story was published.

Steve Millies, a public theology professor and director of the Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, told NCR that the event at Mar-a-Lago appears intended to boost Catholics for Catholics' profile and stimulate its fundraising "in order to keep pressing a message about what it means to be a Catholic in public spaces."

"This doesn't have much to do with Catholicism, except for branding, in the sense of trying to redefine the word in such a way that it stimulates partisan outrage," said Millies, who wrote the 2018 book [\*Good Intentions: A History of Catholic Voters' Road from Roe to Trump\*](#).

Led by Yep, who served as the Arizona state director for the pro-Trump political nonprofit [CatholicVote](#) during the 2020 elections, Catholics for Catholics has achieved a remarkable level of notoriety and influence in Catholic political circles since its incorporation in September 2022.

In a [November 2022 podcast interview](#), Yep said the nonprofit had an audacious goal to "reclaim" the word Catholic, as it applies to politics and public life. "To take it back, to own it," he said.

Catholics for Catholics was one of the lead organizers in the [June 2023 rally](#) outside Los Angeles' Dodger Stadium that drew thousands of Catholics who protested the team's decision to honor the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a LGBTQ drag group that uses Catholic symbols in what some say is a mocking fashion.



Bishop Joseph Strickland, then head of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, walks in a procession in Los Angeles June 16, 2023, to protest the Los Angeles Dodgers honoring the "Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence" drag group during the team's LGBTQ+ Pride Night at Dodger Stadium. (OSV News/Kirby Lee-USA TODAY Sports via Reuters)

Several notable conservative political figures spoke at Catholics for Catholics' official kickoff event in October 2022, including Flynn and Steve Bannon, the former Trump aide and current host of the right-wing podcast War Room.

Also speaking at that event was [Fr. James Altman](#), the outspoken renegade priest from the La Crosse, Wisconsin, diocese whose bishop removed him from active ministry in 2021. According to [federal tax filings](#), Yep served as treasurer and secretary in 2022 for Blood of Martyrs, a Phoenix-based nonprofit that promotes Altman's preaching.

Blake Masters, an Arizona Republican, also spoke at the group's kickoff event while he was running for the U.S. Senate in 2022. Masters, who is Catholic, made headlines that year for promoting conspiracy theories and [accusing](#) Democrats of trying to flood the nation with millions of immigrants "to change the demographics of our country."

Flynn and Caviezel meanwhile have espoused positions linked to QAnon, the far-right conspiracy theory and political movement that believes an international cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic child molesters are operating a global child sex trafficking ring. In 2016, Posobiec, who is Catholic, amplified the QAnon-adjacent "[Pizzagate](#)" conspiracy about a nonexistent Democratic sex dungeon operating below a Washington, D.C., eatery.



Former national security adviser Michael Flynn speaks during an anti-abortion "rosary rally" organized by the group Catholics for Catholics on Aug. 6, 2023, in Norwood, Ohio. (AP/Darron Cummings)

In addition to speaking at QAnon-linked conferences and promoting its ideology, some of the listed speakers at Mar-a-Lago have been engulfed in recent political and ethical scandals. In 2023, Ballard left Operation Underground Rescue amid accusations of sexual misconduct, which he denies. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also [denounced](#) Ballard, accusing him of "morally unacceptable conduct" for allegedly using a church leader's name for personal gain.

Also set to address the audience at the Mar-a-Lago event are pro-life activists Terry Beatley and Patricia Sandoval; Catholic chastity speaker Jason Evert, who [will be leading breakout sessions](#) at this summer's National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis\*; and [Artur Pawlowski](#), a Polish Canadian evangelical street preacher and political activist who clashed with Canadian authorities because of his protests of public health protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contributing to the event's political tone as a speaker will be Thomas Homan, a former acting director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement during the Trump administration. Homan was an [early outspoken proponent](#) of the administration's controversial policy to separate migrant children from their parents.

Also set to speak is Steve Friend, a former FBI special agent and self-described whistleblower on the bureau's investigation into the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol. Friend and another agent were stripped of their security clearances because their conduct in the case raised concerns about their allegiance to the United States, a [bureau official wrote](#) in a May 2023 letter to Congress.

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Millies said that "extraecclesial" groups like Catholics for Catholics have been distorting the church's teachings on political participation for years.

"The whole thing here is an extremely partisan and frankly suspicious effort to bring together people who don't give a good impression of the Catholic faith, in order to promote a political candidate under the name of Catholicism," he said.

"Because all of this is so well-funded and so visible, it goes a long way to create an impression for people in the pews for what they are supposed to do, and it's very hard for bishops and pastors to get this same kind of amplification to correct that," Millies said.

The most recent publicly available tax filing [shows](#) that Catholics for Catholics generated almost \$200,000 in total contributions in the final months of 2022. The filing does not show who donated. Incorporated as a 501(c)(4) "social welfare organization" that can endorse political candidates as long as politics is not the organization's primary activity, Catholics for Catholics is not required to disclose the identities of its donors.

That apparent [loophole](#) in the federal tax code has led to an increase in recent years of similar nonprofits being used as "dark money" vehicles to advance candidates and political initiatives without directly contributing to a candidate's campaign.



Steve Millies, director of the Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago (Courtesy of Steve Millies)

"What we're seeing here is very disturbing," Millies said. "This is about selling an alt-right conspiracy theory version of Catholicism that was once restricted to the fringes and could be ignored. But money is now streamlining this ideology into our pews, and it will not be without an effect on politics, or the church."

In 2023, Catholics for Catholics [published a book](#) of pastoral letters authored by Bishop Joseph Strickland, whom the Vatican [removed](#) in November 2023 from

leadership of the Tyler, Texas, diocese following an investigation into the bishop's leadership and management style. The group says the proceeds from sales of the volume will support both their activities and also Strickland's ministry of offering "guidance and wisdom for all who seek to deepen their faith."

"All this is being done very much despite the church," Millies said. "I don't have any sense, apart from Strickland and a few outliers, that there's any other bishop in the world who is endorsing this version of Catholicism."

In a [November 2022 interview](#) with Lifesite, a right-wing Catholic outlet, Yep said he and like-minded believers were tired of bishops advising Catholics to "vote their conscience" instead of presenting the "correct Catholic choice" for them to support at the ballot box. Yep equated the bishops' nonpartisan approach with an unacceptable "plague of silence."

"If they don't do it, then we gotta do it ourselves," said Yep, who added that his group would not relent in its outspoken advocacy to tell Catholics who they should vote for on Election Day.

"We're not going anywhere," Yep said. "We're here to stay."

***\*Clarification:** After publication of this article, Jason Evert wrote to NCR to say that while he had initially agreed to speak at the March 19 "Catholic Prayer for Trump" event at Former President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, he later decided not to participate.*