

IDEAS

How Extremist Gun Culture Is Trying to Co-opt the Rosary

Why are sacramental beads suddenly showing up next to AR-15s online?

By Daniel Panneton



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Just as the AR-15 rifle has become a sacred object for Christian nationalists in general, the rosary has acquired a militaristic meaning for radical-traditional (or “rad trad”) Catholics. On this extremist fringe, rosary beads have been woven into a conspiratorial politics and absolutist gun culture. These armed radical traditionalists have taken up a spiritual notion that the rosary can be a weapon in the fight against evil and turned it into something dangerously literal.

Their social-media pages are saturated with images of rosaries draped over firearms, warriors in prayer, *Deus Vult* (“God wills it”) crusader memes, and exhortations for men to rise up and become Church Militants. Influencers on platforms such as Instagram share posts referencing “everyday carry” and “gat check” (*gat* is slang for “firearm”) that include soldiers’ “battle beads,” handguns, and assault rifles. One artist posts

illustrations of his favorite Catholic saints, clergy, and influencers toting AR-15-style rifles labeled SANCTUM ROSARIUM alongside violently homophobic screeds that are celebrated by social-media accounts with thousands of followers.

The theologian and historian Massimo Faggioli has described a network of conservative Catholic bloggers and commentary organizations as a “Catholic cyber-militia” that actively campaigns against LGBTQ acceptance in the Church. These rad-trad rosary-as-weapon memes represent a social-media diffusion of such messaging, and they work to integrate ultraconservative Catholicism with other aspects of online far-right culture. The phenomenon might be tempting to dismiss as mere trolling or merchandising, and ironical provocations based on traditionalist Catholic symbols do exist, but the far right’s constellations of violent, racist, and homophobic online milieus are well documented for providing a pathway to radicalization and real-world terrorist attacks.

The rosary—in these hands—is anything but holy. But for millions of believers, the beads, which provide an aide-mémoire for a sequence of devotional prayers, are a widely recognized symbol of Catholicism and a source of strength. And many take genuine sustenance from Catholic theology’s concept of the Church Militant and the tradition of regarding the rosary as a weapon against Satan. As Pope Francis said in a 2020 address, “There is no path to holiness ... without spiritual combat,” and Francis is only one of many Church officials who have endorsed the idea of the rosary as an armament in that fight.

In mainstream Catholicism, the rosary-as-weapon is not an intrinsically harmful interpretation of the sacramental, and this symbolism has a long history. In the 1930s and ’40s, the ultramontane Catholic student publication *Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique* regularly used the concept to rally the faithful. But the modern radical-traditionalist Catholic movement—which generally rejects the Second Vatican Council’s reforms—is far outside the majority opinion in the Roman Catholic Church in America. Many prominent American Catholic bishops advocate for gun control, and after the Uvalde school shooting, Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, lamented the way some Americans “sacralize death’s instruments.”

Militia culture, a fetishism of Western civilization, and masculinist anxieties have become mainstays of the far right in the U.S.—and rad-trad Catholics have now taken up residence in this company. Their social-media accounts commonly promote accelerationist and survivalist content, along with combat-medical and tactical training, as well as memes depicting balaclava-clad gunmen that draw on the “terrorwave” or “warcore” aesthetic that is popular in far-right circles.

Like such networks, radical-traditional Catholics sustain their own cottage industry of goods and services that reinforces the radicalization. Rosaries are common among the merchandise on offer—some made of cartridge casings, and complete with gun-metal-finish crucifixes. One Catholic online store, which describes itself as “dedicated to offering battle-ready products and manuals to ‘stand firm against the tactics of the devil’” (a New Testament reference), sells replicas of the rosaries issued to American soldiers during the First World War as “combat rosaries.” Discerning consumers can also buy a “concealed carry” permit for their combat rosary and a sacramental storage box resembling an ammunition can. In 2016, the pontifical Swiss Guard accepted a donation of combat rosaries; during a ceremony at the Vatican, their commander described the gift as “the most powerful weapon that exists on the market.”

The militarism also glorifies a warrior mentality and notions of manliness and male strength. This conflation of the masculine and the military is rooted in wider anxieties about Catholic manhood—the idea that it is in crisis has some currency among senior Church figures and lay organizations. In 2015, Bishop Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix issued an apostolic exhortation calling for a renewal of traditional conceptions of Catholic masculinity titled “Into the Breach,” which led the Knights of Columbus, an influential fraternal order, to produce a video series promoting Olmsted’s ideas. But among radical-traditional Catholic men, such concerns take an extremist turn, rooted in fantasies of violently defending one’s family and church from marauders.

The rosary-as-weapon also gives rad-trad Catholic men both a distinctive signifier within Christian nationalism and a sort of membership pass to the movement. As the sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry note in *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, Catholics used to be regarded as enemies by Christian nationalists, and anti-Catholic nativism runs deep in American history. Today, Catholics are a growing contingent of Christian nationalism.

Helping unite these former rivals is a quasi-theological doctrine of what Perry and another sociologist, Philip S. Gorski, have called “righteous violence” against political enemies regarded as demonic or satanic, be they secularists, progressives, or Jews. The hostility toward liberalism and secularism inherent in traditionalist Catholicism is also pronounced within Christian nationalist circles. No longer stigmatized by evangelical nationalists, Catholic imagery now blends freely with staple alt-right memes that romanticize ancient Rome or idealize the traditional patriarchal family.

Some doctrinal differences and divisions remain. Many radical-traditional Catholic men maintain the hard-line position that other forms of Christianity are heretical, and hold that Catholics alone adhere to the one true Church. Christian nationalism’s nativism and its predilection for “Great Replacement” theory alienate some radical-traditional Catholics who are not white or who were not born in the United States, and deep veins of anti-Catholicism persist among far-right Protestants.

Yet the convergence within Christian nationalism is cemented in common causes such as hostility toward abortion-rights advocates. The pro-choice protests that followed the leaked early draft of the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*, led to a profusion of social-media posts on the far right fantasizing about killing activists, and such forums responded to Pride month this year with extremist homophobic and transphobic “groomer” discourse. Rad-trad networks are also involved in organizing rosary-branded events that involve weapons training.

Catholics are taught to love and forgive their enemies, that to do otherwise is a sin. But the extremist understanding of spiritual warfare overrides that command. To do battle with Satan—whose influence in the world is, according to Catholic demonology, real and menacing—is to deploy violence for deliverance and redemption. The “battle beads” culture of spiritual warfare permits radical-traditional Catholics literally to demonize their political opponents and regard the use of armed force against them as sanctified. The sacramental rosary isn’t just a spiritual weapon but one that comes with physical ammunition.