

EXCLUSIVE

"Traditional" Catholics and white nationalist "groypers" forge a new far-right youth movement

Activist arm of right-wing Catholic outlet Church Militant is increasingly entwined with racist "groypers" movement

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Anti-abortion activists and church members gather outside of a Catholic church in downtown Manhattan on May 07, 2022. (Stephanie Keith/Getty Images)

This is the second in a two-part series. In our first installment, read about how the aftermath of the leaked Supreme Court opinion overturning *Roe v. Wade* revealed extensive connections between the white nationalist "groypers" movement and the far-right Catholic network around the controversial outlet Church Militant.

The activist wing of Church Militant is called the Resistance network. As of 2020 the outlet said it boasted more than 5,000 members, and claimed to have launched groups in almost every diocese in the U.S. Last June, the group claimed that its protest of a church vaccine drive in Southern California forced the drive to end three hours early. The same month, members of the Resistance network hosted an "affidavit-signing drive at Church Militant headquarters" outside Detroit, joining with other right-wing Michigan groups in demanding a forensic audit of the 2020 election and holding a protest rally on the state capitol steps.

More recently, as Resistance leader Joe Gallagher outlined at a Church Militant rally last November, the group has picketed local bishops; brought "ex-gay" conservative firebrand Milo Yiannopoulos to the Penn State campus to advocate "praying the gay away"; and protested at a Dallas memorial for George Floyd to "bear witness to a real racial injustice: the mass slaughter of the unborn, which disproportionately affects minorities."

Now the Resistance network is looking to recruit directly from the groypers, the largely young far-right followers of white nationalist Nick Fuentes. On May 2, Gallagher interviewed Dalton Clodfelter — the same groypers leader who celebrated the Catholic counter-protester at New York's Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral last weekend — introducing Resistance viewers to Fuentes' website, CozyTV, as a "new streaming platform for a lot of awesome younger conservatives." Gallagher hyped the reported 1,200 attendees at Fuentes' AFPAC III gathering, saying that "obviously

[America First] is booming, you guys have gotten huge... You guys go for the jugular every single time." He continued, "[You go for] the truth, you're not afraid to hide it at all, and that's one of the most respectable aspects of America First, is you guys don't really care. And that's cool."

Clodfelter, who told Gallagher it was Yiannopoulos who first introduced him to Church Militant, pitched America First in a language that his new audience was likely eager to hear. "It's not like it's the alt-right, because that is not even cool anymore, even if you wanted it to be. And it's also not like normie neocon conservatism. ... it's Christian nationalist." He went on, "The message of America First is tied directly to the word of God and spreading Christianity through our nation where it's lacking ... everything we do is [a spiritual battle], we're fighting demons, we're fighting Satan." Clodfelter emphasized the need to "grow the viewer base" of CozyTV, explaining that "a majority of white young Zoomer men would just love CozyTV — the problem is, they don't know where to go to get it."

Clodfelter went on to draw a particular connection between the groypers movement and Catholicism, saying he'd never considered joining the church before getting involved with America First. "I met people who are truly devout, truly living by the word and they weren't hypocrites," he said. "They were representing Catholicism so well for me I was like, wow, the least I could do is go to Mass and do some research." Now, he said, he's studying for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults — the formal process by which unbaptized adults become Catholics — and says he understands why Fuentes says of the groypers, "This is sort of a Catholic movement."

Since then, Resistance has continued to brand itself to appeal to groypers. One advertisement for Resistance posted on Gab last week featured the America First and CozyTV logos as well as a style of sunglasses popularized by Fuentes as part of last year's "White Boy Summer" groypers branding campaign. Meanwhile, as reported in part 1 of this series, Clodfelter attempted to mobilize groypers to attend Resistance counterprotests of pro-choice demonstrations planned for weekend in cities across the country. As of Friday, the events appear to have been removed from Resistance's website, while on Telegram Clodfelter noted late Wednesday night that most of the counterprotests had been postponed, writing, "Working with Church Militant on this to make sure we are doing this in the most organized and safe way." Clodfelter still claims the groypers will rally in Nashville.

Not every Church Militant staffer appears thrilled with the growing crossover, however. In July 2021, Church Militant executive producer Christine Niles remarked on Twitter that "the America First movement, which has great things to say, is ill-served" by Fuentes' open antisemitism. "This unfortunate obsession with the Jews will sink the America First movement, and that's truly a shame." Some audience members have pushed back as well. "Was a supporter of CM, but no more," commented one viewer in February 2020, after Voris ran an interview with Fuentes ally Michelle Malkin. "I'm all for borders. I'm all for preserving Western culture ... but I'm not down with Holocaust denial."

In emailed comments on Wednesday, Voris told Salon, "Church Militant might partner with anyone in a particular effort to achieve a limited and shared goal. In this particular case (Roe), yes. [Church Militant] will link arms with almost anyone who decries the horror of babies being hacked to death in their mothers' wombs. Isn't 'linking arms' the very thing Antifa and BLM and the Democrats do?"

Voris noted that Church Militant did not attend the America First conference in February, "and has no first hand knowledge of what was said or presented." However, he continued, "it should not be surprising that two (or more) organizations that hold GENERAL views of the current cultural crisis would experience SOME crossover of ideas. Every organization on earth shares SOME things in common with other groups. That said — Church Militant doesn't align itself with any specific group in a formal way — including groups that are expressly Catholic."

"Where we enjoy shared ideas, we may cooperate," he continued. "To the degree [Church Militant] 'values' INDIVIDUAL members of any group (not the group as a whole), it is because of shared religious values, namely Catholicism and what the Church teaches on ALL matters."

It is counterintuitive, to say the least, that an ostensibly faith-based organization is embracing a movement so explicitly bigoted as the groypers. Fuentes has engaged in elaborate jokes denying the Holocaust, praised Hitler and told viewers on one livestream show that "frankly, I'm getting pretty sick of world Jewry running the show," to name just several examples of his virulent antisemitism. Fuentes has disparaged African-American voter outreach as attempts to "flood the

zone with n****r votes," called for "total Aryan victory," rejected "race-mixing" because "people should stick with their own kind," bragged that he "made misogyny cool again," celebrated domestic violence against women and much more.

On his Thursday night livestream show, Fuentes responded to the claims made in part 1 of Salon's investigation. "You're damn right the groypers are forming an alliance with the Catholics," he exclaimed, "and you're right we have a plan, and we are gonna take the Republican Party and we are going to drag it against its will back through the doors of the church and to the altar, and we are going to baptize it." Clodfelter, meanwhile, extolled his audience to "show our love and support for Church Militant. These guys are strong, these guys are determined...yes, we're collaborating in this effort to combat Satanism in America, we are. Groypers are everywhere."

While Niles appeared ambivalent about America First, or at least its leader, her colleague, 27-year old Joseph Enders, is a full-fledged groypers. Various named as a reporter, senior producer and associate producer at Church Militant, Enders is a fixture on Church Militant Evening News and a regular contributor to churchmilitant.com.

Enders didn't always support white nationalism. In 2018, he self-identified as an "Augustinian nationalist," claimed affiliation with the Proud Boys and uploaded interviews to YouTube where he argued with white nationalist leaders like Richard Spencer and James Allsup. "The philosophy of the right," he told Spencer in June 2018, should be animated by "a people that focus[es] inward on preserving the traditions of Western culture ... [but] race should not be a consideration in this. I think we should only judge people based on how they exercise their will."

By late 2019, however, when the groypers entered the national spotlight with a series of public stunts challenging conservative leaders on college campuses, Enders had changed his tune. "I don't think anybody is saying we're preserving our race because our race is better," he explained when he called in to the streaming show of Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes on McInnes' Censored.TV platform. Defending the groypers' emphasis on white demographic "replacement" — the conspiracy theory that white Americans are being "replaced" by nonwhite immigration — Enders told McInnes, "You're into fashion, so you'll understand this analogy: When we look at a country, there are people that wear the country the best, and that's usually the founding stock of the country."

Since joining Church Militant's staff in 2020, Enders' embrace of the groypers has continued apace. "Nick is a Mass-attending Catholic, unheard of at his age," Enders posted on Facebook in April 2021. "I can't help but like Nick ... the Right needs more of [his] trollish humor to root out the grifters. It's supremely entertaining." A year later, his support was even more pronounced. "I hear this Nick Fuentes dude is pretty based," he tweeted on April 30, 2022. "I have to say ... I support his efforts to put America First."

On Gab, Telegram and other social media platforms, Enders regularly celebrates America First and its political ambitions; shares content from groypers leaders like Fuentes, Vince James and Anthime Gionet, (aka "Baked Alaska," who on Wednesday undermined his own Jan. 6 plea deal, potentially sending his case to trial); uploads photos of himself sporting the blue "America First" hat and other movement paraphernalia; and participates in debates on movement strategy. Like others in the groypers orbit, he regularly traffics in antisemitism, including using the (((echo))) symbol, a meme created by white nationalists to target Jewish people and organizations. In the first days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Enders quoted, with seeming approval, a statement by Vladimir Putin decrying European countries' supposed abandonment of "Christian values" and shared an article arguing that Putin was seeking to "rebuild Christendom."

White nationalist themes carry over into Enders' work with Church Militant, as well. On Church Militant's website, articles written by Enders quote Fuentes, name the Jewish identity of political opponents and claim that critical race theory "rejects the ethnic identity of White Americans." On the outlet's nightly news program, Enders has championed white nationalist slogans like "it's ok to be white," claimed that "the Left's essential policy when dealing with race is ... 'is it going to hurt white people?'...more dead white people is the policy of the Democrats," and protested the decision by the flagship Conservative Political Action Conference to bar Fuentes from attendance.

When news broke last week that the Supreme Court was moving to overturn Roe v. Wade, Enders' message was direct and disturbing. "Get ready witches," he posted on May 3 on Gab and Twitter, "we're coming for your birth control next."

As mentioned in our first installment, this is all part of a broader pattern of overlap between the far-right, including the white nationalist right, with right-wing Catholicism. In 2017, groyper leader Milo Yiannopoulos was drummed out of many right-wing movements for statements he made minimizing child sex abuse, and subsequently used his return to Catholicism as an opportunity to rebrand. This March he headlined an anti-abortion convention in Ohio that was blessed by the local Catholic bishop, and in June he will be a featured speaker at a Church Militant Resistance bootcamp. Canadian white nationalist Faith Goldy, who was disgraced after appearing on the neo-Nazi website Daily Stormer, likewise touted her return to the church as part of her rehabilitation. "Stop the Steal" organizer Ali Alexander found his way to a new audience at the end of 2020 with a highly public conversion to Catholicism, as did "Kent State gun girl" Kaitlin Bennett in late 2021. They joined a core group of far-right activists who have deployed their Catholic identity in service of their movements, including Pizzagate provocateur-turned conservative commentator Jack Posobiec, former Trump adviser Steve Bannon and Fuentes himself.

As the alt-right was planning its 2017 march in Charlottesville, Virginia, one of the most popular places where activists did their planning was a Discord chat forum called the "Nick Fuentes forum," dedicated to exploring connections between "Unite the Right" and the Catholic Church. Within it, hundreds of posters discussed traditionalist Catholicism and posted memes alternating, or combining, Crusades-era imagery with neo-Nazi and antisemitic content.

As journalist Eric Martin reported at the liberal Christian magazine Sojourners, some posters identified themselves as "Charles Coughlin Roman Catholics," for the 1930s pro-fascist priest and broadcaster who helped pioneer the demagogic media style that is fracturing our democracy today. Fuentes himself has waxed nostalgic about fascist and monarchist regimes in Europe and Latin America that were grounded in Catholic teaching, and in 2018 declared on a livestream that, "in an ideal world," there would be "a global Catholic theocracy" and that "the state should enforce morality that is informed by Catholic teaching."

More broadly online, far-right activists online began adopting phrases like "Viva Cristo Rey" (Christ the King) or "Deus Vult" (God wills it) in their posts and tweets, and Catholic symbolism like medieval crosses and Crusader imagery.

Some conservative Catholics have welcomed this development. In a 2019 article published by the Catholic right magazine Crisis, "Kids in defense of the culture," American Greatness editor Pedro Gonzalez praised Fuentes' groypers. "They have chosen to be guided by a Christianity hammered free of the dross of the modern world," Gonzalez wrote. "In an age of compromise and petty principles, groypers have chosen to stand for something, armed with little more than digital slingshots. That alone is reason enough to hear them out."

But moderate and liberal Catholics were appalled. "It's such a horrifying appropriation of Catholicism," noted writer and researcher D.W. Lafferty in a 2020 podcast episode produced by Where Peter Is, a moderate Catholic website that tracks the Catholic right. Lafferty described the new far-right aesthetic as "Pepe Catholicism," while Georgetown University theologian Adam Rasmussen called it "Catholic LARPing": a way for the alt-right to pretend they were "Knights Templar fighting the forces of darkness in the deep state."

As Vatican correspondent Christopher Lamb, author of the papal biography "The Outsider: Pope Francis and His Battle to Reform the Church," explained during the 2020 presidential campaign, the far right's adoption of Catholic symbolism was a means for the movement to infuse itself with deeper spiritual meaning. "The populists and nationalists were looking for some kind of soul for their politics. And they found it in some symbols of the faith," Lamb said. "And they're powerful symbols. Quite often they make the whole case that the past has been lost."

"In a sense, you empty the content of the religious," Lamb noted earlier this year, "and use the externals — the rosary beads, the crucifix, some words, perhaps some prayers — but you use it as an identity marker to give your movement a sense that it has a soul or deeper intensity at a moral level."

But that influence goes both ways, and as Lamb noted in 2020, as more and more right-wing Catholics identified themselves with Trump's re-election campaign, "Trumpism," in turn, "got into the church."

As Lafferty said at the time, "What's happening on the right, I think, is unprecedented," except for the historical examples of ultranationalist fascist groups before World War II, such as Action Française in France or the Falangist movement in

Spain. "But fascism isn't new and the Catholic Church was often complicit in fascism," he added. "So it's not totally shocking that people can come in and do this."

The revelation that some highly enthusiastic and visible elements of the Catholic right are now partnering with a group whose reputation is based on snarky displays of over-the-top bigotry just marks an escalation of that trend.

"This is a continuation of a pattern that's been happening for years," said Lafferty, "and it's only going to become more intense now that we're looking at the possibility of Roe v. Wade being overturned." As a faithful Catholic, he agrees with the Church's stance against abortion, he said, but he also sees the imminent SCOTUS reversal as one more "pillar of what we call 'normal' falling."

"I worry whenever you see anti-abortion rhetoric mixed with anti-immigrant rhetoric or isolationist foreign policy," said Lafferty. "It feeds into this spreading panic that Western culture is disappearing and immigration is killing Christianity and white hegemony. Ordinary Catholics who may have good intentions need to wake up to this — the bishops included. Because if we look at what's happened in the Republican Party, a fringe populist element eventually took over. We could see the same thing in the church."

Massimo Faggioli, a church historian at Villanova University and author of "Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States," observed that "almost anyone with an internet connection and an attitude can start a Catholic blog or website" these days. And that means "there are forces, movements, energies in this underworld that don't appear officially in the Catholic handbooks or registers, but are there. They have a following that is still small, but no longer as marginal as it used to be."

"The 'America First' Catholics have momentum," Faggioli said, as well as a powerfully motivating narrative: That "this is a time for war." That, he said, is what makes the growing alliance between groups like the groypers and Church Militant dangerous. "It's bigger than just the number of those who are physically involved in these movements. We know how influential they are with young priests, with the seminarians. Their voice is magnified because, in the church as in many other organizations, it's not how many there are but where they are. What is their position? What are the assets they can mobilize?"

The "biggest capital" such groups possess, Faggioli said, "is the sign of our times, our zeitgeist. There are clouds on the horizon, a bad moon rising — domestically, internationally. And religion plays an important part."