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Tony Hinchcliffe arrives to speak before Republican presidential nominee former President Donald Trump during a campaign rally at Madison Square Garden, Sunday, Oct. 27, 2024, in New York. (AP/Evan Vucci)

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Amid outrage over racist jokes told at a Donald Trump campaign event in New York City on Sunday (Oct. 27), some Hispanic Christian leaders are raising questions about the Republican candidate's standing with a crucial ethnic and religious demographic a week before Election Day, with a prominent Puerto Rican bishop demanding a personal apology.

Tony Hinchcliffe, a standup comedian, opened Sunday's event at Madison Square Garden with a set that referred to Puerto Rico as a "floating island of garbage" and made disparaging comments about immigrants and Latinos.

"These Latinos, they love making babies, too," said Hinchcliffe, who then added a lewd remark.

The Trump campaign immediately tried to distance itself from Hinchcliffe's "floating island of garbage" remark. Campaign Senior Adviser Danielle Alvarez told Religion News Service the joke "does not reflect the views of President Trump or the campaign."

But in an open letter addressed to Trump and sent to RNS on Monday evening, Archbishop Roberto O. González Nieves of the Archdiocese of San Juan condemned the remarks, saying he is doing so after conferring with his fellow bishops.

"Puerto Rico is not a floating island of garbage," the letter read. "Puerto Rico is a beautiful country inhabited by a beautiful and noble people, which is why in Spanish it is called '*un encanto, un edén*,'" or "an enchantment, an Eden." He continued, "More Puerto Rican soldiers died in the Vietnam War as part of the United States military than soldiers from any state of the United States."

González went on to say Hinchcliffe's remarks "do not only provoke sinister laughter but hatred" and "should not be a part of the political discourse of a civilized society," invoking "a climate of equality, fraternity and good will among and for all women and men of every race, color and way of life" as the "foundation of the American dream."

The Franciscan archbishop, part of the Order of Friars Minor, then called on Trump to personally apologize for the remarks, saying it is "not sufficient for your campaign to apologize."

González was echoed by the Rev. Gabriel Salguero, who heads the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, said his phone began buzzing with texts and phone calls as soon as footage of Hinchcliffe's comments began circulating on social media on Sunday.

"I was on the phone for hours after that," said Salguero, a Floridian whose family is part of the Puerto Rican diaspora. "Our community is deeply offended. We don't endorse candidates, but we do endorse decency."

Salguero said that while members of his faith community are not a monolith and many will likely still vote for Trump, "It certainly did not help him."

Salguero sent a separate statement in which NaLEC decried the "deeply xenophobic and lewd rhetoric made by a comedian targeting Latinos and other communities at the rally in Madison Square Garden last night.

"We firmly believe that racialized attacks should have no place in political campaigns and are contrary to the Gospel we proclaim," the statement read.

The NaLEC statement included more of Salguero's personal response, saying, "As a Puerto Rican living in Florida whose parents and siblings were born in Puerto Rico, has many relatives still living on the island, and had many relatives who served courageously the United States military, I take this as a personal affront. My wife, children, parents, extended family and friends are not 'garbage' as this joke crudely insinuated. As a Christian, I forgive offenses but I also call for repentance and an apology for platforming this hurtful rhetoric."

The remarks drew a more qualified reproach from the Rev. Tony Suarez, the vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and a longtime

faith adviser to Trump. Suarez, in a written statement, said Hinchcliffe's performance "made me cringe," and noted "the crowd didn't seem to find him funny either." Suarez in his statement buffered his criticism by suggesting supporters of Vice President Kamala Harris, including her running mate Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, were guilty of overwrought rhetoric by [comparing the New York event to a Nazi rally](#).

"I wish the mud slinging would stop on both sides," Suarez's statement read. "From comparing President Trump's event in NYC to a Nazi gathering to disparaging remarks regarding the beautiful island of Puerto Rico, none of this is productive."

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Reached by email, the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the NHCLC and another Trump faith adviser, responded to questions about the joke by writing "Puerto Rico is beautiful!"

"That joke was not funny," added Rodriguez, who spoke at a faith-themed Trump event on Monday. "I am glad the crowd did not respond and I am likewise glad the Trump campaign did respond, pushing back on the joke that was completely inappropriate and foolish."

Trump has courted Hispanic evangelicals for as long as he has run for president, with some success. There is [evidence](#) it helped him in Florida in 2020, and he's worked to replicate that effort this year: At a recent Latino Americans for Trump event in the state, Hispanic evangelical pastors prayed over Trump and asked God to make him president.

"We anoint (Trump) to be the next, 47th president of the United States, to restore the biblical values," said Guillermo Maldonado, senior pastor of King Jesus International Ministry in Miami, as he prayed over Trump. Puerto Rican voters are also well-represented in swing states, with the [2020 U.S. Census reporting](#) more than 450,000 residing in Pennsylvania, 109,000 in Georgia and 1.1 million in Florida. In 2020, Trump lost Pennsylvania to Biden by 80,555 votes.

Some Puerto Ricans already perceive Trump as having a negative relationship with the U.S. territory after his visit to the island in the wake of Hurricane Maria. In an

appearance at a church where supplies were being distributed to waiting victims of the storm, Trump threw packs of [paper towels](#) at the crowd in a scene that seemed to make light of the disaster.

A year after Maria, 52% of Puerto Ricans [said](#) Trump had done a "poor" job of responding to the disaster, with 44% reporting that theyâ??d been without power for more than three months; others reported economic, property, health or vehicle damage. Retrospective studies [found](#) thousands of deaths had occurred due to the hurricane.

The comments at the rally may sour more Latino Catholics against Trump as well. Nichole Flores, associate professor of religious studies and director of the Catholic Studies Initiative at the University of Virginia, said she was "shaking with rage" when she heard about Hinchcliffeâ??s comments.

Calling herself "deeply offended, but also deeply saddened," Flores said that her family and community had been talked to in "vile and almost animal-like terms."

Flores saw Hinchcliffeâ??s comments about Latino sexuality "in real continuity" with Trumpâ??s infamous comments about Mexicans as rapists at his [2015 campaign launch](#), part of a "theme that Latinos are not just a threat to society, but that somehow weâ??re sexually deviant and other, and that is one of the bases for rejecting us from American society."

Other than GonzÃ¡lez, U.S. Catholic bishops contacted by RNS, including Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who serves as the archbishop of New York and sat next to Trump at the Al Smith fundraiser convened in that city earlier this month, did not respond or declined requests for comment about the comedianâ??s jokes. The lack of response did not surprise Flores, who said prelates had focused their public engagement on abortion as a "preeminent priority."

"Had these remarks been about abortion, we likely would have heard from the bishops already," Flores said. "Latino identity and dignity is not placed on that same level."

Chieko Noguchi, the spokesperson for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in a statement the group does not "endorse political parties or candidates" and declined to comment on "something that was said during a political event."

"But," Noguchi added, "Pope Francis invited us to seek 'a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good' in his encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*. We should strive to seek the truth, build bridges, and find solutions together that promote the common good and dialogue in a respectful and meaningful way."

Flores, for whom democracy is a key area of academic study, said that "while a lot of people have already voted," Latinos "who are still weighing their votes will have this as their final impression."

Still, there are many Latinos who have already voted for Trump or will still do so. For Flores, "this reveals something important and really damning about our political culture today, that the dignity of the human person and the dignity of life is not at the center of politics.

"That speaks to deeper challenges that Catholics, and Christians more broadly, have in offering an authentic public witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in the world, because if this is that witness, then we have a lot of work to do," she said.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)