



Andrea Tornielli, editorial director at the Dicastery for Communication speaks at a news conference at the Vatican Sept. 19, 2024. (CNS/Justin McLellan)



by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

[View Author Profile](#)

jmclellan@ncronline.org

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Donald Trump's handpicked representative to the Vatican insists that when Pope Leo XIV said the United States-led war in Iran did not meet the criteria of a just war, he was not speaking as the moral leader of the world's largest religious denomination.

The Vatican, it seems, disagrees.

After Brian Burch, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, characterized the pope's criticism of the war as the intervention of a head of state "coequal" to the U.S. president — rather than a pronouncement by the head of the Catholic Church — one of the Vatican's top communications officials appeared to clap back with his own interpretation of the papal office.

The pope's status as a head of state exists to guarantee his independence from political powers, Andrea Tornielli, editorial director of the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication, wrote in a July 13 [editorial](#) published by the Vatican's state media channel.

"Any glorification or exaggeration of the Pope's role as head of state, any emphasis on the importance of this role, is therefore misleading because it comes at the expense of his one true mission as universal Shepherd," he wrote.

Although Tornielli did not mention Burch by name, the seemingly unprompted commentary was published on the Vatican's official news site four days after the ambassador's [interview with The New York Times](#) appeared.

In that interview, Burch "argued that when the pope spoke out against the war, he was not doing so as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, the vicar of Christ, but only as the sovereign political leader of the Vatican City-State," the Times reported.

Burch said that "when the pope acts as the sovereign leader of the Holy See, he is coequal with world leaders," according to the Times article.

Yet Tornielli's commentary, which did not cite any particular event, stated that when the pope "calls for an end to the mad arms race — even going beyond the concept of a 'just war' ... the Successor of Peter is not speaking as a head of state. He is simply proclaiming the Gospel."

On his flight to Spain last month (June 6), Leo [said](#) that "in Iran, the criteria for a just war are not present."

"Just war theory dates back to centuries when it was impossible to imagine the weapons and destructive capacity available to humanity today," the pope continued.

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Burch, however, told the Times that "the Vatican has not said, nor will they say, declare definitively whether or not this is a just or unjust war," arguing that the pope could not make such a judgment because he had access only to "a set of limited facts."

Just war theory has [taken center stage](#) within the church since the United States began its military campaign in Iran, prompting prominent clergy, [including Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington](#), to challenge the war's morality. In his recent encyclical on humanity in the age of artificial intelligence, Leo [wrote](#) that just war theory is "outdated."

The world's cardinals [discussed the church's approach to just war theory](#) when they gathered in Rome last month (June 26-27), though no definitive revisions to church teaching were announced.

The Vatican's apparent rebuke of Burch highlights strained relations between Washington and Rome which have been fueled by Catholic Vice President JD Vance's [open pushback against the pope's understanding of just war theory](#) and punctuated by the [president's own digital diatribes](#) against Leo.

In the Times interview, however, Burch brushed off Trump's rhetoric as "negotiating" with the pope to secure his support in stopping a global nuclear disaster.

Those tensions have not precluded Leo, the first U.S.-born pontiff, from making friendly overtures toward his home country.

After returning from a July 4 visit to the Italian island of Lampedusa, a migration hotspot, Leo, [visited the U.S. ambassador's residence](#) for an Independence Day celebration, where he was treated to homemade apple pie.

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