

# Where Vance found his way back to faith



## Unique local parish a setting in VP's newest memoir

**Victoria Moorwood** Cincinnati Enquirer | USA TODAY NETWORK

MADEIRA, OH – Low lights and the smell of burning incense welcomed parishioners as they shuffled into their pews for a Sunday evening Mass at St. Gertrude.

The brick-and-stone church was full for the June service in Madeira, Ohio, a leafy, affluent suburb of Cincinnati. Parishioners knelt before a towering gold figure of the crucified Jesus and listened to the pastor talk about the omnipresence of God, interrupted only by the squeals of babies and the shuffling of hymn book pages.

This church, with its stained glass windows, golden accents and friars clad in 13th-century-style robes, is where Vice President JD Vance became a Catholic.

Vance has put his faith center-stage of his political identity. He met with former Pope Francis days before his death, has disagreed publicly with Pope Leo XIV, and labels himself a Christian first on his X bio.

On June 16, Vance released his second memoir, "Communion: Finding My Way Back to Faith," focused on his conversion to Catholicism at Greater Cincinnati's St. Gertrude in 2019.

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Vance has publicly disagreed with Pope Leo XIV, whom he met at the Vatican in May 2025.

SIMONE RISOLUTI/VIA REUTERS

Top: St. Gertrude, founded in 1923 but rebuilt in the 1960s, is the only Dominican parish in Greater Cincinnati. ALBERT CESARE/THE ENQUIRER

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The vice president did not return an interview request for this story.

## St. Gertrude, where Vance was baptized, 'not your typical Catholic church'

When Vance returns to Cincinnati, he attends St. Rose of Lima in the city's East End neighborhood, a Catholic church closer to his East Walnut Hills home. But he chose St. Gertrude as his church to be baptized in 2019.

The church, part of the Dominican Order, was founded in Madeira in 1923. It was replaced by the current building in the early 1960s.

St. Dominic created the Dominican Order, officially known as the Order of Preachers, in 13th-century France to combat heresy. The order is known for its intellectualism and followers' rigorous study. It later played an important role in the Inquisition in medieval Europe.

Today at Cincinnati's parish, sermons with traditional classical music and Latin chants keep 800-year-old traditions alive.

Friars live together at the church, including Dominican novices who spend a year there before going to the House of Studies in Washington, DC. At any given time, over a dozen people wearing white habits are roaming church grounds, which isn't something you'd see at another Cincinnati Catholic church, said the Rev. John Paul Walker.

"It's not your typical Catholic church on a Sunday," said Walker, who became St. Gertrude's pastor in 2022. "That exposure to religious life is something that I think inspires people."

Parishioners drive over 30 minutes for the unique experience. Walker said two-thirds of the church's roughly 6,000 members don't live in Madeira. Many members are families with young children. The second-closest Dominican church to Cincinnati is St. Patrick in Columbus.

When a new person wants to join the church or become Catholic, like Vance did in 2019, they interview with a friar. The process takes months, typically starting in the fall and ending with an Easter baptism. During those months, prospective members participate in weekly classes and seminars where they learn the basics of Catholic faith, doctrine, spirituality and prayer.

While the share of Greater Cincinnati Catholics dipped in recent years, the overall rate of Catholic worshippers across the United States has remained pretty stable over the past two decades. Membership at St. Gertrude, though, is rising.

Mass attendance at St. Gertrude has bounced back from the big losses churches experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and is up roughly 16% over pre-pandemic levels, according to 2025 attendance records published by the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. That bucks the trend across Greater Cincinnati, where over-



Worshippers are drawn to St. Gertrude for the parish's traditional style.

PHOTOS BY ALBERT CESARE/THE ENQUIRER

all Mass attendance hasn't fully recovered.

Since August, roughly 30 new members have joined, all of them entirely new to Catholicism. Worshippers in their 20s make up a large portion of new attendees.

"What we're seeing, especially among the young, even in families where there was no religious practice, is there's a thirst for something out there," Walker said. "We're starting to see this revival, where it's this younger generation that's searching for something. And they end up finding us."

## Vance stayed in touch with St. Gertrude priest who baptized him

In 2019, Vance, then 35, was one of those new members.

After years of feeling frustrated by conflicting desires for success and morality, Vance's conversion to Catholicism at St. Gertrude began with "a few informal conversations with a couple of Dominican friars," he wrote in *The Lamp*, a Catholic journal, in 2020.

Vance was baptized at the Madeira church in mid-August in a private ceremony. Afterward, Dominican friars welcomed his family and friends, including his



"The world is in a lot of chaos, and in times that are more chaotic people look for stability," Rev. John Paul Walker said about St. Gertrude's growth.

"It's not your typical Catholic church on a Sunday."

The Rev. John Paul Walker Pastor since 2022

then-2-year-old son Ewan, with coffee and doughnuts.

Vance wrote about undergoing a “more serious period of study” with the friar who baptized him, the Rev. Henry Stephan.

Stephan no longer serves at St. Gertrude, but the two have remained in touch. Vance gave him a tour of the White House on St. Patrick’s Day in 2025.

Vance and Stephan met during the latter’s two-year stint at St. Gertrude.

Stephan, who majored in politics at Princeton University, had planned to become a lawyer. He interned for Judge Diarmuid O’Scannlain on the Ninth Court of Appeals, according to a 2023 interview he did with the Irish Rover, Notre Dame’s student-run Catholic publication. O’Scannlain suggested he become a Catholic priest.

Stephan is now pursuing a doctorate at the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, focusing on medieval political theory, according to his student bio.

He declined an interview with The Enquirer because of his relationship with Vance’s family.

**Church where Vance was baptized responds to ICE controversy**

After his baptism and years before he would become vice president, Vance told the American Conservative his views on public policy mostly aligned with the Catholic Church. Many of his views seem aligned with the teachings at St. Gertrude, including his anti-abortion stance. A January sermon listed abortion alongside adultery and murder as “always evil.”

But Vance’s policy on immigration enforcement has, in his two years as vice president, often conflicted with the Catholic Church. That tension was the topic of the church’s most-listened-to sermon podcast episode, Walker said.

In the January sermon posted to Spotify, Walker said the Catholic Church believes people have the right to migrate to seek out a better life, and that prosperous nations are obligated to “welcome the foreigner.” However, countries also have the right to regulate their borders and are not compelled to accept all migrants.

Walker said immigration enforcement is not a “negative or an evil,” but that individual enforcement officers could commit evil acts.

Another teaching, Walker said in the sermon, is that immigrants should respect the heritage of their new country – and “respect the Christian heritage of our nation.”

The share of Hispanic Catholics in the United States is on the rise, and almost 30% of U.S. Catholics are immigrants, according to a 2025 Pew Research Center study. Speaking to The Enquirer, Walker said the church doesn’t keep track of how many of its parishioners are immigrants.

In the January sermon, Walker called on parishioners to pray for all sides. That includes immigrants who migrated “the right way” and “the wrong way,” for ICE agents and protesters, and for “our president and vice president.”