

Tim Walz’s Catholic Roots

Baptized Catholic-Turned-‘Minnesota Lutheran’ Germany, Luxembourg, Ireland, Nebraska ... Catholic



Minnesota Governor and Democratic vice presidential candidate Tim Walz speaks during a stop on a campaign bus tour with US Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris in Rochester, Pennsylvania, on August 18, 2024. (Photo: Angela Weiss / Getty)

Matthew McDonald | Nation | August 19, 2024

Tim Walz identifies himself as a “Minnesota Lutheran.” But long before that, he was a Nebraska Catholic.

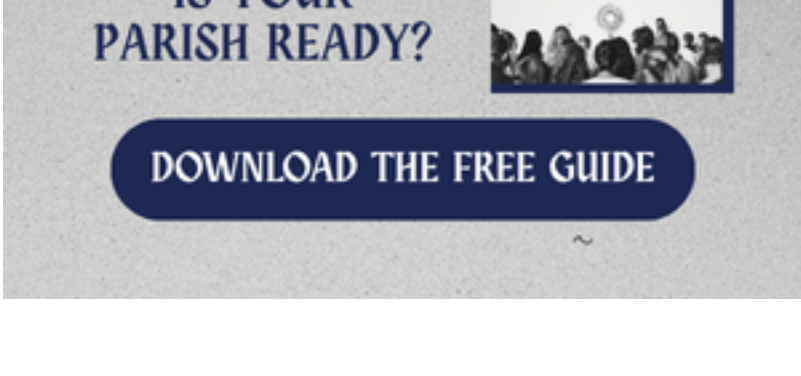
Walz, 60, doesn’t say much about religion publicly, though he says he became a Lutheran after he got married in 1994.

He has described his family as New Deal Democrats. The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* described Walz in October 2018 as “steeped in the Catholic social justice traditions of his parents.”

“Growing up Catholic, we had John Kennedy memorabilia in the house,” Walz told Minnesota Public Radio, according to *The Independent*. He noted that his mother was pregnant with him when Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, “and I guess there was a debate about calling me ‘John’ when she was picking names.”

Instead, they named him Timothy James. He was born in April 1964 in West Point, Nebraska, the third of four children.

His parents, Jim and Darlene, had met in the tiny village of Butte in northeastern Nebraska, where Darlene’s family has lived for more than a century and where Jim was teaching math and coaching athletics. They moved several times after getting married in 1955, following Jim’s career in public education.



Walz grew up going primarily to two Catholic churches — St. Nicholas in Valentine, Nebraska, a picturesque community of 2,600 that calls itself “America’s Heart City”; and Sts. Peter and Paul in Butte, where his family returned after his father got sick with lung cancer. (He died in 1984.) They bought a farmhouse and had it moved into town and renovated, a family friend told the Register. Tim was one of 23 students who graduated in 1982 from Butte High School, where his father was superintendent.



Saints Peter and Paul Church in Butte, Nebraska.

Walz has moved far since then — geographically, religiously and professionally. After two decades as a public-school teacher, he ran for Congress in 2006 at age 42 and won. In 2018, he ran for governor of Minnesota and won, then won reelection in 2022. Now, he’s Kamala Harris’ running mate.

Along the way, Walz has compiled a political record on social policy that would be unfamiliar to JFK Democrats of the 1960s.

The Minnesota Catholic Conference, which represents the state’s diocesan bishops on public policy matters, released a statement Aug. 6 noting areas of agreement with Walz on child tax credits and immigrants and “areas of strong disagreement, including protecting the innocent unborn from abortion, the protection of children from the manifestations of gender ideology, and the importance of parental rights in education.”

America’s Heartland

Butte (population 286) is the county seat of Boyd County (population 1,810) in northern Nebraska, about a four-hour drive from Omaha and about 6 miles south of the South Dakota border. It’s farm country. Farmers grow mostly corn and soybeans and they raise cattle.

Butte is defined in Nebraska law as a village, because of its small population. It’s named for the small hills outside the downtown area, which is mostly flat and (according to Google Maps) has seven streets that run north-south through the entire village and five streets that run east-west through it, with some shorter streets in between. It was named the county seat in 1891 when Boyd County was formed, according to an online history of the county.

The population of Butte has been falling steadily since its peak of 623 in 1940. One longtime resident tells the Register the downtown has a bank, a café, a boutique, a trucking company, an agriculture risk consulting company, a gas station and a bar. Tours of the former county jail, a brick building built about 1915, are available by appointment.

Other than Tim Walz, Butte’s most famous resident is George Wagner (1915–1963), a professional wrestler known as “Gorgeous George,” who was born there.

David Derickson, a member of the county’s elected board of supervisors and retired county sheriff, described Butte as friendly but not overly prosperous.

“I would say Butte’s a welcoming community. They’re trying to survive just like every other small community,” Derickson said. “There’s not a whole lot of money, but they’ll still try to do what they can for somebody.”

In 2020, Donald Trump won Nebraska by 19 points, but he won Boyd County by a lot more — 87% to 12%.

The day after Walz was announced as Harris’ running mate, a flagpole went up on a vacant commercial lot in Butte where a building had been recently demolished.

“We’re a conservative community, for the most part. Most of us were pretty much raised the same way: God, family, country,” said Marge Nolan, office manager at Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Butte. “You work. You take care of your family. You support the Church. You get an education.”



Catholic Forebears

Walz comes from a long line of Catholics.

Most of his ancestors were German speakers with German surnames, from various parts of Central Europe. His German-speaking ancestors came from western Germany; from Bavaria; from the Alsace region in what is currently France; and from northern Luxembourg. All of them appear to have been Catholics, according to marriage records, baptism records, and other data available through online genealogical sources.

Walz is one-eighth Irish. Those ancestors were also Catholics.

He is also one-quarter Swedish, through his father’s mother. Those ancestors were Lutherans. But Walz’s dad was raised a Catholic and identified that way the rest of his life. On his college yearbook page, he listed “Newman Club” — as the Catholic group named after St. John Henry Newman is known on many college campuses — as his activity.

Online genealogical sources offer hints of the importance of Catholicism to Walz’s ancestors.

A March 1915 front-page obituary of Tim Walz’s Germany-born great-great-grandfather, Sebastian Walz, offered details about his funeral Mass while also offering a sense of his faith.

“Mr. Walz was a man that faced the exigencies of life with strong heart and good courage,” *The Lawrence Locomotive* of Lawrence, Nebraska, said. “When it was his to die he welcomed the end, fully confident in the hope of the life to come, and feeling that his work on earth, and his duties as father and husband, had been performed as directed by His Master, to the full fruition of his glory and to the complete service of his family and fellowman.”



The obituary continued, “Mr. Walz represented in citizenship the hardy German stock from which he came. He possessed the virtue of honor to a high degree and in all his dealings he was scrupulously careful that every man receive that which was his.”

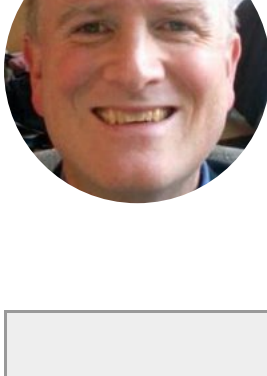
Tim Walz’s Church

In recent times, Walz has occasionally identified Pilgrim Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, as his parish. It’s part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, which in 2021 ordained a bishop who identifies as transgender.

During a church service at Pilgrim on Sunday, Aug. 11, written material invited congregants to “pray the prayer that Jesus taught us,” beginning the Lord’s Prayer with “Our Guardian, Our Mother, Our Father in heaven ...” (The prayer begins at 35:40 of the video on the church’s website.)

Walz remains close to his mom, who visits him in Minnesota. Nolan told the Register that Darlene Walz, 89, goes to Mass regularly on Sundays and often attends the church’s Rosary prayer group meetings and other events.

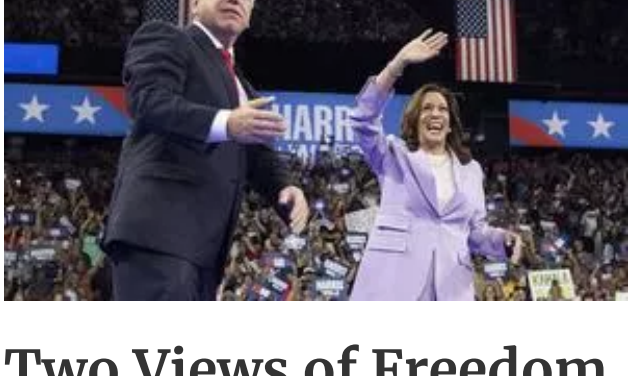
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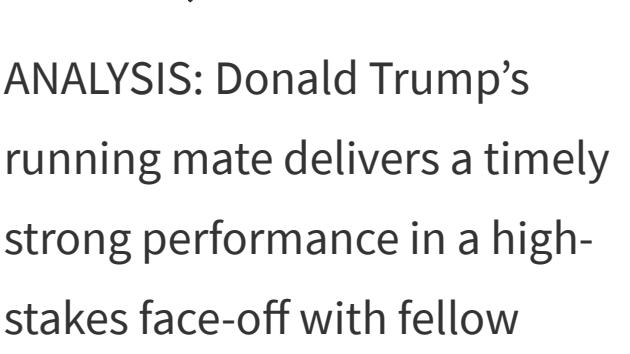
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