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Trump's Christlike image is filled with sloppy symbolism

Why the AI-generated meme — which the president posted on his social media platform, then removed — is offensive even to nonbelievers.

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Column by [Philip Kennicott](#)



President Donald Trump posted this AI-generated image to Truth Social on Sunday. (RealDonaldTrump/Truth Social)

There is a frightening urgency in the clumsy, AI-generated image of President Donald Trump [posing as a saintly figure, perhaps Jesus](#) himself. Trump posted the meme to his Truth Social account on Sunday evening, shortly after [a long message criticizing Pope Leo XIV](#). It was taken down Monday after widespread outrage from [people who considered it blasphemous](#).

As so often happens when an image is poorly made and overwrought, it conveyed more meanings than the artist — or whoever fed prompts into the AI generator — intended.

Among those messages: a palpable sense of desperation. In the rapid and angry response to the meme, one sensed a coalition beginning to crack, and in the message itself — unfiltered, offensive and unhinged — one sensed the instability of the man who disseminated it.

The central figure is Trump, dressed a bit like the pope (whom he denigrated Sunday as “[WEAK on crime](#)”), in a white robe or cassock and a cape of rich, papal red. A spark of magical or divine light bursts forth from the palm of the president’s left hand while he reaches out to touch the head of an ailing man with his right hand.

Trump later claimed that this was meant simply as an image of healing. “I thought it was me as a doctor, and had to do with Red Cross, as a Red Cross worker, which we support,” he said.

This may be an image that represents healing, but Trump clearly isn't a doctor. Rather, he is giving what is known as the thaumaturgic touch, the miraculous power of healing by laying on of hands. If the image generator had left out the white robe and red mantle, he might have claimed merely to be depicting the "royal touch," the power to heal claimed by kings, especially English and French kings, in the Middle Ages. But that claim also touches on blasphemy, given that the power to heal supposedly came from (and reinforced) the king's divine right to rule.

It isn't clear who created the image, but it fits Trump's well-established style, dense with the basic icons of American patriotism and militarism, foregrounding the flag and the bald eagle, with the Statue of Liberty and the Lincoln Memorial in the background. There are jet planes and bombs bursting in air and soldiers marching magically, or celestially, through the firmament.

Like the paintings of [Jon McNaughton](#), a pro-Trump artist who often paints mash-ups of patriotic and Christian imagery, the Trump-as-healer image is overstuffed with people, or rather, The People, a homogenized assembly reduced to the basic archetypes of awe, rapture, resilience and determination. And dependence. Like a [famous Trump portrait by artist Julian Raven](#), it flatters the president in ways that conform to his well-known insecurities, filling in his thinning hair.

The graphic style has its roots in the picture-book illustrators of the 20th century. Whoever made this was crudely striving for the narrative clarity and emotional immediacy [of artists such as N.C. Wyeth](#) or Norman Rockwell. But it doesn't even rise to the level of lesser figures, like [Arnold Friberg](#), who created perhaps the closest analogue: A famous [series of paintings to illustrate the Book of Mormon](#), full of drama and a similar mix of muscularity, vigor and saintliness.

Condensation is essential to narrative clarity, and that's where this image, like so much AI slop, fails utterly. Trump often doubles or trebles when a single thing would be better, or sufficient. Thus, he erected not one but two giant flagpoles outside the White House. And here, the artist doubles the eagle and triples the planes. Less is usually more; in this case, *more* just reads as desperate.

Editing an image down to its essentials, however, requires the artist to make choices and set boundaries. In a famous painting of George Washington at Valley Forge, Friberg shows the nation's leader kneeling beside his horse, praying. A shaft of light bathes the general and his steed in golden light, suggesting divine sanction to the American project. It's patriotic glop, but it's effective, and it stays within the bounds of acceptable democratic imagery by representing Washington's faith, rather than any suggestion that he himself is a divine figure.

The inability to edit this picture, to clarify its message, should have offended even the most ardent Trump supporters who didn't balk at the blasphemy. You can't have an image of healing without somebody being sick, and this image embodies sickness in the form of a middle-aged White man with a haggard face and the rough hands of a workingman. Thus, it is Trump's base — his core supporters — who the image implies are sick.

It also suggests that the bond between Trump and his base is one of mutual dependence, perhaps codependence. The light that emanates from his hand — which is often seen in photographs covered with bruises and makeup — echoes a halo of light emerging from behind the head of the sick man. Is Trump giving light, or soaking it up? Who empowers whom? When a relationship is codependent, who is the first to leave it?

That's why this pseudo-painting is also terrifying. The creator of the meme just couldn't stop, and he, she or it apparently went too far, evident in the image's removal from social media. Trump rarely backs down, but he has this time, only days after backing away from a threat to destroy the Iranian people ("A whole civilization will die tonight," he said via social media). Trump's backing down may reassure people who want to believe there are still some guardrails to this presidency, but it only underscores his increasingly erratic behavior.

If the bond between Trump and his loyal base is the fuel that has allowed him to power through controversies and chaos that would have derailed any other politician, this image suggests the reactor is growing unstable. It isn't just that Trump has a core of messianic supporters, who recognize no lines between church and state. Now it's clear that while Trump has fed off their fervor, he has never really understood who they are, what they believe, and where their red lines are drawn.

If it all falls apart, where will it leave his supporters? And what of Trump? Where does that energy go?