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Bishops pray during a Nov. 12, 2025, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. The meeting ends Nov. 13. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

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by Michael Sean Winters

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The overarching story from this year's plenary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is that an increasingly slim majority of the bishops, but a majority nonetheless, wants to continue their experiment in Gallicanism. Though not a formal heresy, Gallicanism was the mistaken, and repeatedly condemned, idea that the national church should predominate over the universal, that Rome could be ignored when it suited the political interests of key prelates. Its French iteration, which gave it its name, began in the reign of Louis XIV and died with many soldiers on the battlefield at Waterloo.

Sadly, the spirit of Gallicanism still held sway in Baltimore this week.

Archbishop Timothy Broglio, the outgoing conference president and a devoted Gallican, delivered his final presidential address. It had some fine phrases, such as:

"We challenge those we are privileged to serve with the message of eternal life — not as an escape, but rather as a goal, the one end that is always important."

"Jesus identifies with the hungry, thirsty, helpless unborn, stranger, naked, homeless, and prisoner. He assures us that we meet Him in those others. It should surprise no one when we defend the unborn, meet the basic needs of the immigrant, lobby for immigration reform, reach out to those in need outside our borders through CRS, and call upon others to do the same."

How far apart is the current leadership of the [USCCB] from the Holy See and universal church? Archbishop Broglio did not mention Vatican II in his address. Not once.

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Alas, such words stand in judgment over the last three years of Broglio's tenure as conference president.

The USCCB has routinely muted its criticism of the Trump administration, even when the administration was attacking those migrants entrusted to the pastoral care of the bishops. It is worth noting that even when the conference did criticize the Trump administration on Broglio's watch, as in their recent statement opposing the [administration's extension of IVF treatments](#), the text did not mention the president by name. Conversely, criticisms of the Obama administration almost always identified the president by name, such as [this statement](#) when Obama voiced support for same-sex marriage. Such differences may seem small, but they are noticed by political powerbrokers. They explain why the faithful have, on the whole, come to see the USCCB as an apologist for Trump.

By contrast, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the apostolic nuncio, also delivered his final address to the bishops. Pierre will turn 80 in January and will likely be replaced around that time. Since arriving in 2016, Pierre has sought to encourage the bishops to come together and to align themselves with the leadership of Pope Francis and, now, Pope Leo.

The nuncio framed his [address](#) with references to the need to continue implementing the Second Vatican Council. "I am convinced that Vatican II remains the key to understanding what kind of Church we are called to be today, and the

reference point for discerning where we are headed," he said near the beginning of his talk. "Pope Leo also is convinced of this. Two days after his election, he told the Cardinals: 'I would like us to renew together today our complete commitment to the path that the universal Church has now followed for decades in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.' "

He concluded his talk saying: "The Council is not behind us; it stands before us, the map for our journey. To the questions with which we began — Where have we been, and where are we going? — the deepest ecclesial answer is this: We are a Church rooted in the grace of the Second Vatican Council; a Church still receiving and embodying its vision; a Church sent forth in unity, as disciples and shepherds, bringing hope, joy, and mercy to a world."

Cardinal Christophe Pierre, papal nuncio to the United States, delivers his address during a Nov. 11, 2025, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

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How far apart is the current leadership of the conference from the Holy See and universal church? Archbishop Broglio did not mention Vatican II in his address. Not once. Many, perhaps most, conservative Catholics believed that St. Pope John Paul II completed the reception of Vatican II. They are wrong. Their opposition to Pope Francis was rooted in a desire to arrest any further implementation of Vatican II. For them, the Holy Spirit stopped speaking to the church when John Paul II breathed his last.

Broglio passed the presidential — and Gallicanist — [baton](#) to Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City. Some may wonder why Coakley's association with the [Napa Institute](#) — he is the group's "ecclesiastical advisor" — is so troubling. The organization [sent an email](#) after Coakley's election praising him and touting his affiliation with the group.

The [problem](#) is that Napa has been engaged in a systematic effort to dilute and distort Catholic teaching about the economy and has utterly ignored the moral failures of President Donald Trump's politics. The group's libertarianism focuses on the wallets of the rich, but it is libertarianism nonetheless. Napa is to social doctrine what Catholics for Choice is to church teaching on abortion: Both groups want the

church to be completely subservient to the ethos of the dominant culture. Neither group recognizes one of the most obvious lessons of the post-conciliar theological landscape: Dissent is uncreative and boring.

[Napa's board](#) is a Who's Who of the Catholic right, but conservative Catholics have as much right to organize themselves as any other group of Catholics. The Lord Jesus can find a home in conservative hearts as well as liberal ones. But when either extreme prioritizes its own excesses over the mediating and moderating role of the Holy See, you have schismatic tendencies that are dangerous to the life of the church. When such tendencies are allied with gobs of money, everyone should get nervous.

headshots of Archbishop Paul Coakley and Bishop Daniel Flores

A combination photo shows Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City, president-elect of the U.S. Conference of Catholic bishops, and Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, vice president-elect. They were elected during the Nov. 11, 2025, session of the fall general assembly of the USCCB in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

The contest for the presidency was surprisingly close. To strengthen their hand, the current leadership nominated two more conservative bishops to succeed Coakley as conference secretary. Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Ft. Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, was elected over Archbishop-designate James Checchio, soon to be coadjutor of New Orleans. That said, the new vice president, Brownsville, Texas, Bishop Daniel Flores, is nobody's fool and he will not likely roll over when any divergence from the Holy See is advanced. So, too, the conference treasurer, Archbishop Bernard Hebda of St. Paul-Minneapolis, is no culture warrior. The executive committee will witness some very interesting debates, albeit behind closed doors, in the next three years.

In the elections for committee chairs, none of the contests represented an ideological choice. For example, Bishop Mark O'Connell, auxiliary of Boston and soon-to-be bishop of Albany, was elected chairman-elect of the Committee on Child Protection, defeating Bishop John Dolan of Phoenix. Both men have been strong supporters of Pope Francis and, now, Pope Leo. Similarly, in the contest for chairman-elect of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, two pro-Francis bishops, Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Archeparchy of Philadelphia and Archbishop Edward Weisenburger of Detroit, were pitted against each other, with

Gudziak winning. Committee chairs also serve on the conference's administrative committee, so four of the six new members are men more in tune with Rome.

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There are many issues on which virtually all the bishops are united among themselves and on the same page as the Holy See. For example, the bishops approved the new Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services by a vote of 206-7, with 8 abstentions. They are not the least controversial for anyone who understands, as Catholics do, that our understanding of human nature is shaped profoundly by our religious beliefs. Kaiser Family Foundation's Health News ran [an article](#) entitled: "The Powerful Constraints on Medical Care in Catholic Hospitals Across America." The article is not just biased. The author and those interviewed seem genuinely perplexed at the idea that there should be moral considerations that prohibit certain medical procedures, as if the history of medicine is not littered with horrible crimes perpetrated by people who failed to ask if a thing should be done, focusing only on what can be done.

The bishops, with very few exceptions, are worried about caring for migrants. The difference emerges when they decide how that issue should be ranked in comparison to other issues and how to interact with the Trump administration. They all work to make sure Catholic Charities can care for the poor in their diocese. All the bishops worry about the quality of preaching in their parishes. All worry about having to close parishes or shutter a school.

The differences, however, are also profound. A little less than half the bishops recognize the need to continue the reception of Vatican II, walk with the Holy See, exercise a preferential option for the poor, embrace synodal methodologies to both overcome the polarization in society and the church and to better evangelize the men and women of our time. And a little more than half do not share those priorities. That fact puts the Catholic faith in the U.S. on a dangerous track that leads to a more nationalistic church, incapable of criticizing the pathologies in the ambient culture, an easy prey for manipulative politicians and plutocrats.

At a moment in the life of our nation and of our church, I fear the USCCB will spend the next three years hobbling along, tripping over itself, too divided internally to help heal the polarization of society, too often silent in the face of previously unthinkable challenges to our democratic norms. The Dogmatic Constitution on the

Church, [*Lumen Gentium*](#), states that "the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race." It is difficult to see how the bishops' conference will fulfill that mission in the next three years.

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2025** feature series. [View the full series](#).