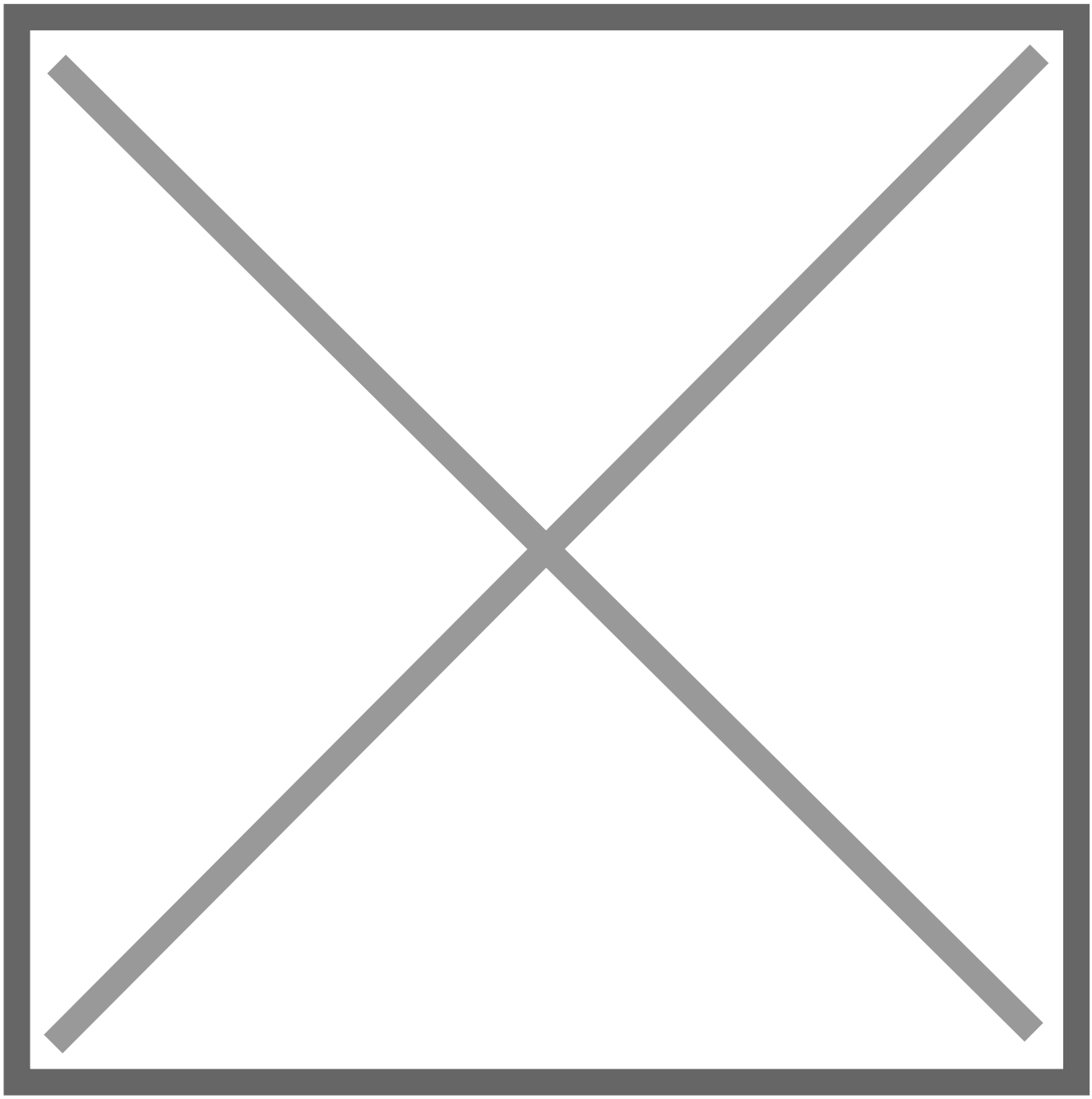
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Cardinal Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, imposes hands on Bishop-designate Ralph O'Donnell during his ordination and installation Mass at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Jefferson City, Mo., Oct. 28, 2025. (OSV News/Courtesy of the Diocese of Jefferson City/Dan Bernskoetter Photography)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Washington, D.C. — March 9, 2026
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The appointment of Archbishop Gabriele Caccia as apostolic nuncio to the United States brings to a close the tenure of one of the most significant papal nuncios in the history of the Vatican's relationship with the U.S., that of Cardinal Christophe Pierre. Caccia has some very large shoes to fill.

When he arrived in 2016, then-Archbishop Pierre inherited a deeply divided hierarchy and the divisions were not only internal: Many U.S. bishops were suspicious of, or hostile to, the pastoral agenda of Pope Francis. The bishops' conference took virtually no action to implement Francis' landmark encyclical Laudato Si'.

The twin synods on the family in 2014 and 2015 had exposed major differences of opinion among the hierarchs. And many bishops remained reluctant to embrace the "seamless garment" approach to life issues even while others thought it was the only way to prevent the Catholic Church in this country from becoming an arm of the Republican Party.

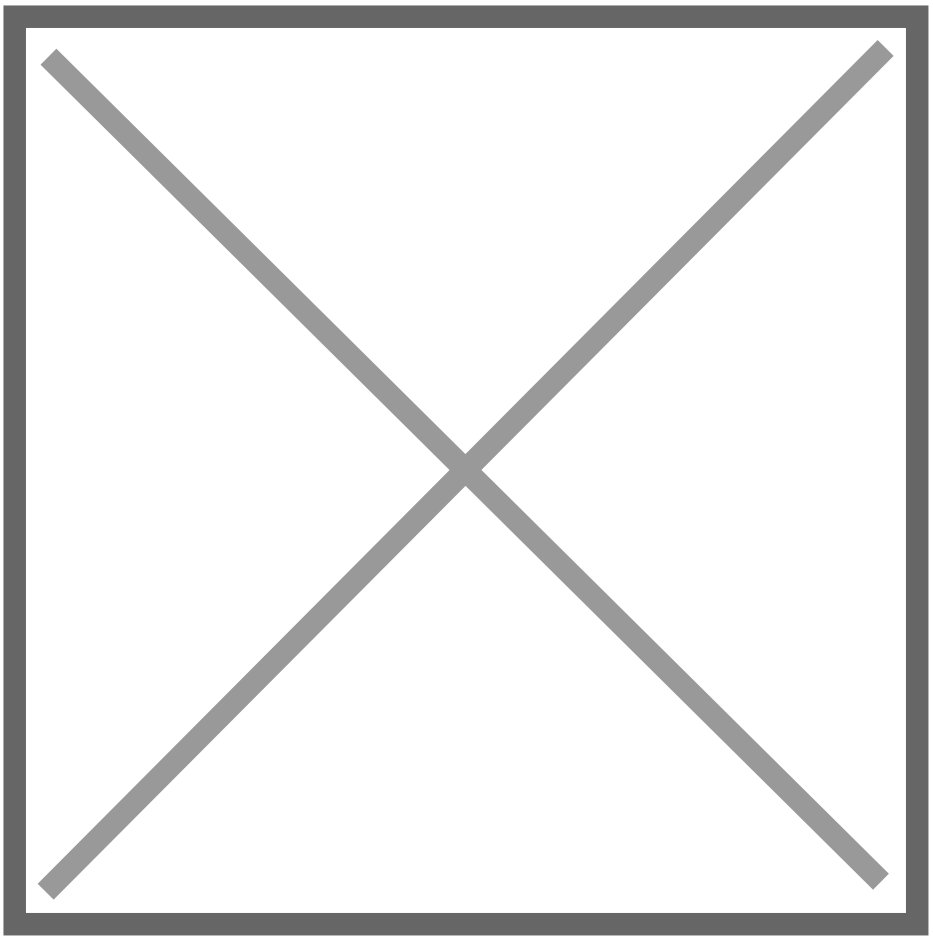
> No nuncio had to replace a sociopath, as Pierre did when he arrived. The now excommunicated and disgraced former archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano was not, as George Weigel foolishly argued in 2016, the "best nuncio we

have had thus far." He was the worst.

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There have long been divisions within the hierarchy. In the fall of 1894, the first apostolic delegate to the U.S., Archbishop Francesco Satolli, who had championed the Americanist wing of the Church led by Cardinal James Gibbons and St. Paul Archbishop John Ireland, began to turn against these more liberal prelates and align himself with the conservatives led by New York Archbishop Michael Corrigan and Milwaukee Archbishop Frederick Katzer. When the new nuncio, Augustinian Archbishop Sebastian Martinelli arrived in 1896, and was greeted at the dock by Corrigan and other conservatives, he not only had to confront a divided hierarchy, but one in which the larger faction, the Americanists, felt burned and distrustful.

In confronting the challenges facing him, Pierre got out from behind his desk. He was on the road, meeting with people, attending conferences and other ecclesial gatherings. He attended all five of the Way Forward gatherings of bishops, theologians and other church leaders. He always attended the New York Encounter, sponsored by the group Communion and Liberation. He visited colleges and universities to meet with academic leaders and speak to students .



Archbishop Mark Rivituso is embraced by Cardinal Christophe Pierre, papal nuncio to the United States, during Rivituso's installation Mass at the Cathedral-Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Mobile, Ala., Sept. 3, 2025. (OSV News photo/courtesy of the Archdiocese of Mobile/Elizabeth Gelineau)

In 2019, Francis, in his annual address to the nuncios, said, "If a nuncio were to close himself up inside the nunciature and avoid meeting with people, he would betray his mission and instead of being a factor of communion and reconciliation, would be an obstacle and impediment to it. You must never forget that you represent the face of the Catholicism and universality of the Church among the local Churches throughout the world, and before governments." A friend in the Vatican diplomatic corps who has known Pierre since his service in Uganda said the future cardinal was known for getting out and meeting the people even back then.

Nuncios have encountered different challenges over the years: Dealing with the U.S. government during two world wars at a time when the U.S. did not have official diplomatic relations with the Holy See being one of them. Even after relations were

established in 1984, and apostolic delegates were officially called nuncios, there were difficulties, especially in the lead up to the Iraq War when Pope John Paul II dispatched Cardinal Pio Laghi, a former nuncio, to urge the Bush administration not to start the war.

No nuncio had to replace a sociopath, as Pierre did when he arrived. The now excommunicated and disgraced former archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano was not, as George Weigel foolishly argued in 2016, the "best nuncio we have had thus far." He was the worst. He almost sabotaged an otherwise brilliantly successful papal trip in 2015 by presenting the Kentucky clerk who had gone to jail for failing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, Kim Davis, to the pope, describing her as a "prisoner of conscience." Bosh. As I noted at the time, "Davis was not jailed for practicing her religion. She was jailed for forcing others to practice her religion." That is not conscientious objection.

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Around the same time, three of the counselors at the Vatican embassy came to La Sirenita restaurant in Riverdale, MD to help me celebrate my birthday. They informed me that Gloria TV had denounced me that very day. I was unfamiliar with this news outlet, which turned out to be a cross between EWTN at its worst and the now defunct Church Militant — a home to conspiracy theories and rightwing propaganda pretending to be orthodoxy. They told me that Vigano watched Gloria TV every day.

Pierre helped remake the American hierarchy he inherited from that horrible man. His recent round of appointments to archdioceses allowed him to fill half of the nation's metropolitan sees. The final appointment of the young Archbishop Ronald Hicks of New York will prove a gift to the U.S. Church for many years. I did not always agree with the candidates Pierre favored, but all were fine churchmen, devoted to Francis and now to Pope Leo XIV, pastors first and foremost, allergic to ideology. Our friends at The Pillar claim Cardinal Pierre was often at loggerheads with Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich and New Cardinal Joseph Tobin, both of whom sit on the Dicastery for Bishops. This is nonsense. Of course there were tensions: The three men are vastly different in temperament and played different roles in the process of recommending candidates to the pope. But there was no deep-seated difficulties in those relationships.

Many of us will miss Pierre especially for his humor. He is an extraordinarily funny man and, like most Frenchmen, took a special joy in poking fun at the oddities of American culture. He served both popes and the Catholics of this country with a keen intellect and a sharp eye for pastoral candidates for the episcopacy. He will be missed.

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