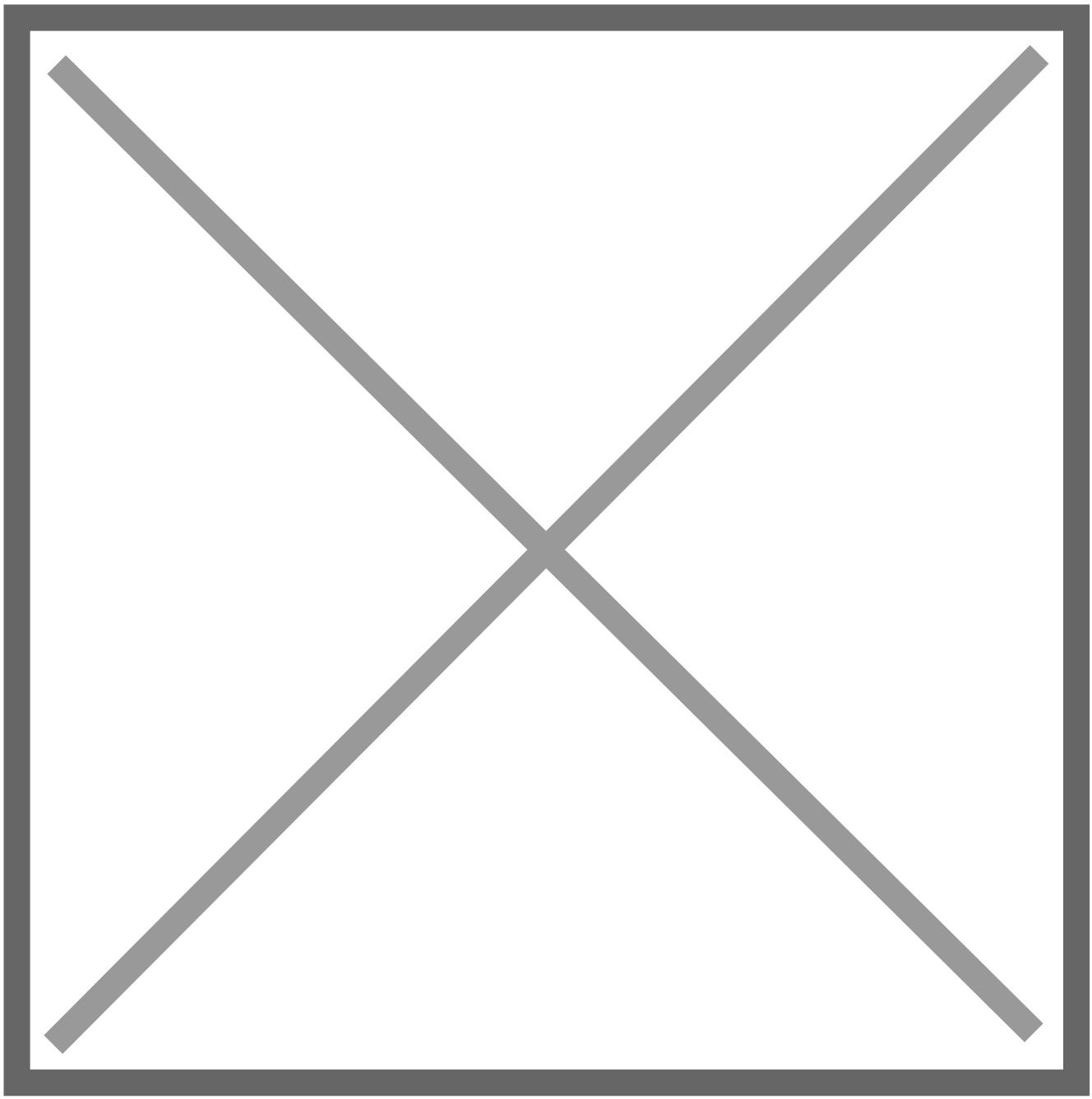
News



Bishop James D. Conley of Lincoln, Neb., is pictured in a 2012 photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Julie Asher

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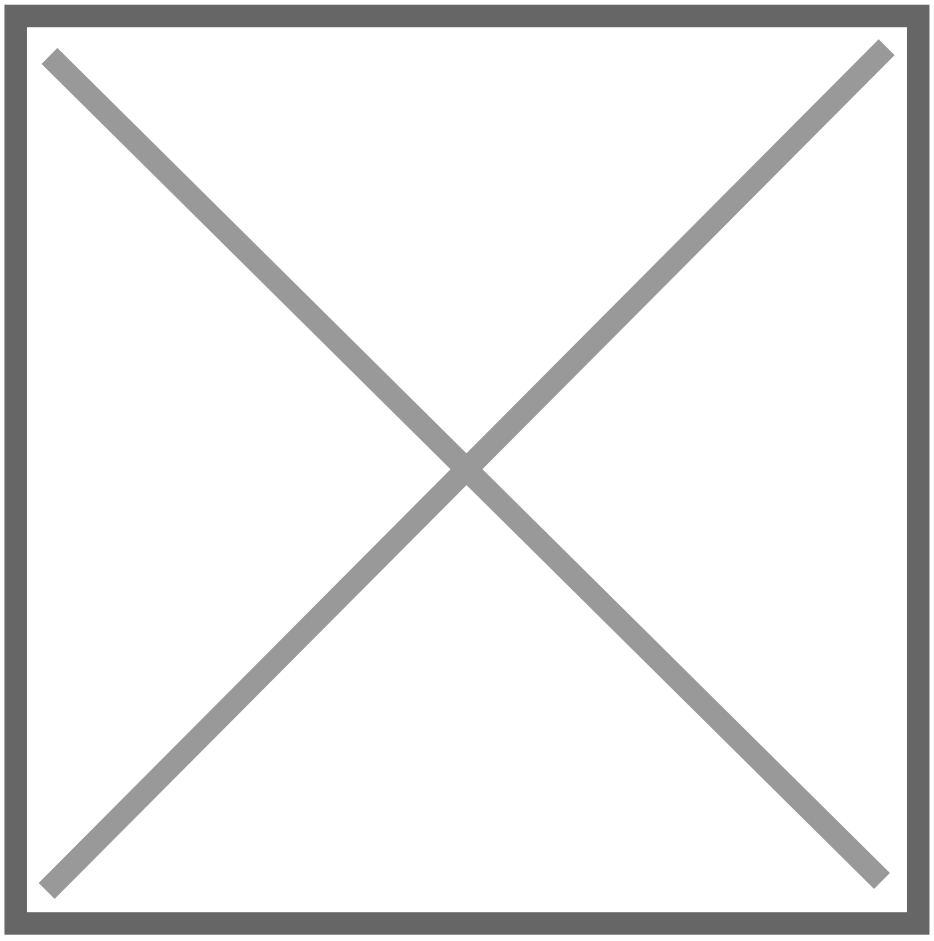
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Washington — November 16, 2020

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Bishop James D. Conley of Lincoln, Neb., is pictured in a 2012 photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

As the U.S. bishops opened their two-day fall meeting Nov. 16, Bishop James D. Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska, thanked his brother bishops and Archbishop Christophe Pierre, papal nuncio, for their support during his 11-month medical leave of absence.

Pope Francis authorized him to return to full pastoral care of his diocese Nov. 13.

"It's been a great source of strength and grace for me," Conley said from Lincoln as bishops joined their general assembly virtually from around the country. The meeting this year was conducted online due to the pandemic.

"We live in very difficult times and there are a lot of stresses on bishops and it's only going to get worse," he said, advising his brother bishops not to hesitate to reach out if they are struggling mentally or psychologically from stress.

He told them about a new support outreach created by the Catholic Medical Association called "A Holy Alliance" for bishops facing struggles themselves who want to talk to "a good Catholic physician personally" or want to discuss help for a priest in his diocese.

In Lincoln, Conley announced to his diocese "with great joy" he had returned from his medical leave and that Pope Francis had authorized him to resume full pastoral care of the diocese.

"During the past 11 months, I have received wonderful care from my spiritual director, mental health professionals, and medical doctors, along with the loving support and prayers of my family, my brother bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful," Conley said in a Nov. 12 letter to the Catholics of the diocese.

"Through their help, I have been able to arrive at a positive path forward with more balance in my life, which, I pray, will allow me to serve the Diocese of Lincoln in a greater way," he said. "I cannot imagine trying to get through this dark time in my life without faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and the hope of sharing in his resurrection. It is hope that has sustained me."

In December 2019, he received permission from Pope Francis to take a temporary medical leave from his ministry. That month, Conley said, he was diagnosed "with depression and anxiety, along with chronic insomnia and debilitating tinnitus."

"My doctors encouraged me to take the time to receive more concentrated medical and psychological treatment, and to get some much-needed rest," he said.

"Before going on medical leave, I tried to overcome my depression and anxiety on my own," he said. "I've learned that this is simply not possible. Mental health problems are real health problems. And as with any illness, you cannot fix it yourself; you need the care of others."

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In his absence, Pope Francis named Archbishop George J. Lucas of Omaha, Nebraska, to be apostolic administrator of Lincoln.

"I am glad to have Bishop Conley back home. I look forward, along with Bishop Joseph (G.) Hanefeldt of Grand Island, to once again be working with Bishop Conley on matters that affect the common good here in Nebraska," Lucas said in his own Nov. 12 letter to the faithful of the Lincoln Diocese, whom he thanked for their kindness toward him.

"While my efforts in the diocese have necessarily been somewhat limited during the past 11 months, your kindness to me has been bountiful," he said. "The support of your prayers has meant a great deal to me. It has been a privilege to serve as apostolic administrator of the diocese, and I am grateful to God and to all of you."

He asked them to join him in praying for Conley as he resumes his ministry. "May the Lord Jesus daily reveal his presence to him and may the Holy Spirit empower him for a fruitful ministry among you."

In his letter, Conley said: "Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we live in uncertain and unprecedented times, times when many have lost hope. While it pained me to be away this long from my flock, the good people of the Diocese of Lincoln, I am eager to preach the message of Christian hope during these difficult times."

He was thankful "for all of the letters offering prayers and well-wishes I've received during my time on leave."

"Many expressed to me their own struggles with mental health issues. I hope in some way, my own struggles will help lift the stigma of mental health issues, and

show that there is light at the end of the tunnel for those who suffer from mental illness," he said.

"Please continue to pray for me as I resume my ministry in the Diocese of Lincoln. You will continue to be in my prayers," added Conley, who has been bishop of Lincoln since 2012.

The Diocese of Lincoln serves more than 90,000 Catholics in southern Nebraska, in more than 130 parishes.