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Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, sits in the cathedra, or bishop's chair, as he concelebrates Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Nov. 15, 2021, in Baltimore during the bishops' fall general assembly. (CNS/Bob Roller)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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Perhaps 2021 will be remembered as the year that we got used to living with a pandemic as the "new normal." Sadly, it may also be the year that U.S. Catholics got used to a "new normal" of near-constant culture war battles in our church.

The year opened with the shameful storming of the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to overturn the results of a valid presidential election. The next day, we editorialized that Catholics needed to confess their complicity in what was, in effect, a failed coup.

"Catholic apologists for [former President Donald] Trump have blood on their hands," we wrote, calling out "some bishops, priests, a few sisters, right-wing Catholic media and too many people in the pro-life movement," as well as the more than 50% of Catholics who voted for Trump "after four years of incompetence, racist dog whistles and assaults on democratic norms."

Just a few weeks later, we witnessed how even the U.S. bishops' conference would join the culture battle brewing against the nation's second Catholic president. On Joe Biden's inauguration day, even as Pope Francis was sending a telegram of congratulations and best wishes, the conference president, Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, instead issued a 1,200-word statement outlining disagreements about policies that "would advance moral evils," though also offering his prayers.

It was just the beginning of what would become a yearlong divisive, pointless campaign to smear the nation's second Catholic president, a campaign led by Gomez.

As head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for the past two years, Gomez has squandered his presidency fighting dead-end culture wars. The year was bookended by Gomez's moves to attack Biden and a year-end speech denigrating social and racial justice movements that do the work of the Gospel. In an organization whose history is peppered with failed leaders, it is hard to find one less accomplished. For this, we name Archbishop José Gomez as NCR's Newsmaker of 2021.

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Gomez's actions have been particularly disappointing given the excitement among Latino Catholics when the Mexican-born prelate was elected in 2019 as the first Latino to hold the post of president of the U.S. bishops' conference. Others were hopeful because of his reputation of being more pastoral, rather than a culture warrior.

We wish NCR had had better news to cover from Gomez. He could have used his presidency to encourage Catholics and others to get life-saving vaccines, welcome Catholics back to church after they were vaccinated, make the church an active leader in the racial reckoning happening in our country, and lead the fight against climate change to save our planet. Missed opportunities all.

But rather than build upon his history of supporting immigrants' rights, Gomez has instead squandered the majority of his presidency fighting culture war battles, such as the ones this year about politicians and "eucharistic coherence" and against racial and other social justice movements.

The Biden/Communion controversy started even before the new year, with the formation of a secret working group after Biden's election to assess the "problems" of a Catholic president who supports abortion and LGBT rights. The working group called for a document on "eucharistic coherence," which was code for denying Communion.

The controversy over the "wafer wars" continued to simmer throughout the spring — even as the Vatican tried to send signals to the bishops to back off — and erupted into a full boil at the U.S. bishops' meeting in June. Held virtually because of the pandemic, the meeting included discussion and a vote on plans to move ahead with the document on so-called "eucharistic coherence."

After two hours of divisive debate, during which some bishops insisted the document wasn't about pro-choice politicians, while others repeatedly brought up the names of Biden, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and others, the conference voted to move forward with the drafting of the document.

> José Gomez has not been made a cardinal, which is unusual for the archbishop of Los Angeles. His distressing leadership this past year would not seem to recommend him for the promotion.

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Following regional gatherings of bishops over the summer, conference leaders seemed to unite in an effort to put the whole public relations nightmare behind them. (It likely didn't help the bishops' case for denying Communion when Francis reportedly told Biden during their private meeting at the Vatican that he should keep receiving the sacrament.)

By the November bishops' meeting in Baltimore, the draft to be voted on could best be described as "tepid," "milquetoast" and representing a pre-Vatican II theology, but it didn't single out Biden or pro-choice politicians. Instead, it merely mentioned that laypeople who "exercise some form of public authority" have "a special responsibility to form their consciences in accord with the Church's faith and the moral law, and to serve the human family by upholding human life and dignity."

After just a few minutes of debate, the document passed by a vote of 222-8, with three abstentions.

But for the bishops' conference president, the culture war had already shifted from Biden to the Black Lives Matter movement. In a virtual speech less than two weeks before the Baltimore meeting, Gomez attacked what he called "America's new religions," claiming that some modern social justice movements, including anti-racism ones, were Marxist-inspired, anti-Christian "pseudo-religions."

Warning that the traditional Christian perspective is being "cancelled" from public life, Gomez made an apparent nod to conservative anger over "wokeness" and critical race theory when he said that "even public schools are actively promoting and teaching this vision."

Black Catholics responded with dismay and disbelief, while social-justice-minded Catholics of all races also criticized the tone-deaf speech.

Ordained in 1978 as a priest of the conservative Catholic movement Opus Dei, Gomez was named an auxiliary bishop of the Denver Archdiocese by Pope John Paul II in 2001. Four years later, he was made archbishop of San Antonio, again by John Paul, and finally archbishop of Los Angeles by Pope Benedict XVI in 2011, after one year as coadjutor. Gomez has not been made a cardinal, which is unusual for the archbishop of Los Angeles. His distressing leadership this past year would not seem

to recommend him for the promotion.

Read this next: What Gomez could learn from Catholic social and racial justice activists

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 24, 2021-Jan 6, 2022** print issue under the headline: Archbishop Gomez, a failed culture warrior.