Opinion
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Candidates for the upcoming 2022 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops presidential and vice p

Candidates for the upcoming 2022 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops presidential and vice presidential elections are shown clockwise from top left: Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services; Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City; Bishop Frank Caggiano of Bridgeport, Conn.; Bishop Michael Burbidge of Arlington, Va.; San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone; Seattle Archbishop Paul Etienne; Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller of San Antonio; Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas; Baltimore Archbishop William Lori; and Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind. (CNS composite/photos by Tyler Orsburn; Archdiocese of Oklahoma City; Gregory A. Shemitz; Bob Roller; Dennis Callahan, Catholic San Francisco; Paul Haring; Bob Roller; Bob Roller; Tyler Orsburn; and Bob Roller)



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Two weeks from today, the U.S. bishops will gather in Baltimore for their annual plenary meeting. The most important business will be electing a new president and vice president of the conference from a slate of 10 nominees. Usually, the vice president ascends to the top spot, but this year, the vice president is Archbishop

Allen Vigneron of Detroit, who is already 74. To be eligible for election, you must be able to serve the full term before the mandatory retirement age of 75.

It is no secret that there are some deep ideological divisions within the bishops' conference. Many U.S. bishops, more than any other hierarchy in the world, have resisted Pope Francis' approach to implementing the Second Vatican Council in a more pastoral, less ideological, manner. The controversy surrounding the Tridentine rite of the Mass is a substantial problem only here and in France. No hierarchy from a major, industrialized country has done less to implement the vision of Laudato Si', the pope's groundbreaking encyclical on care for creation. Last year, as some bishops wanted some kind of statement urging a policy of denying Communion to pro-choice politicians, the Vatican had to throw a wet blanket on the plans, pointing out how out of sync the U.S. bishops were with their brother bishops in the rest of the world.

That said, I think pundits tend to overemphasize the role of ideology in understanding the bishops' conference. Lifelong relationships, often forged at seminary, matter just as much. Familiarity with bishops in different parts of the country makes a bishop more electable, as does having a winning personality. Most importantly, the bishops want a president and vice president who can accomplish the conference's work both at home and especially at the Holy See.

This last consideration effectively rules out two candidates, San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone and U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services Archbishop Timothy Broglio.

Cordileone's affection for the Tridentine rite, as well as his pugnacious personality, has earned him few admirers among his brother bishops, and certainly not raised his standing in the eyes of the Bishop of Rome who issued Traditiones custodes, restricting that rite. His graceless response to the elevation of a San Francisco priest Robert McElroy to the cardinalate, showed a pettiness, especially when compared to the graciousness shown by Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez.

Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services greets a U.S. Nav

Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services greets a U.S. Naval Academy cadet midshipman after the annual Sea Services Pilgrimage Mass at the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Md., Oct. 2, 2022. (CNS/Jason Minick, courtesy of Devine Partners)

Broglio's problem is different. He has been at odds with Pope Francis going back to the 1990s, when he served as private secretary to Vatican Secretary of State Angelo Sodano. There is a deeper problem with the Sodano connection. Broglio was Sodano's right-hand man when the Vatican sternly opposed efforts by bishops who wanted a more forceful response to the emerging clergy sex abuse crisis.

"Sodano was a Machiavellian power broker whose role as Pope John Paul II's Secretary of State is one of the high mysteries of that papacy," Jason Berry, one of the foremost journalists reporting on the clergy sex abuse crisis, told NCR by email. "Sodano all but scoffed at the idea of human rights. He gave visible support to the Chilean dictator Pinochet, arguing persuasively for the pope to avoid any criticism of Cardinal [Hans Hermann] Groer, the predator who resigned in disgrace in Austria in the mid-'90s, and, notably, he was a catalyst John Paul's long cover-up of Father [Marcial] Maciel, founder the Legionaries of Christ and trailed by pedophilia accusations."

Why would the U.S. bishops, who have striven so long to come to grips with the sex abuse crisis, select as their spokesman someone with that kind of baggage? It has always surprised me that Broglio has never been subpoenaed, although he might have enjoyed diplomatic immunity during that posting. He was only a monsignor, to be sure: He worked for Sodano, not the other way around.

Still, you can bet one of the first questions posed to him at a press conference would be why he did not resign or become a whistleblower when confronted with efforts to protect a sociopath like Maciel.

Pope Francis meets with the leadership of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in the libra

Pope Francis meets with the leadership of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Oct. 13. Pictured with the pontiff are Fr. Michael Fuller, general secretary; Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron, vice president; Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, president; and Fr. Paul Hartmann, associate general secretary. (CNS/Vatican Media)

If you want to unite the bishops' conference, it is important to find two candidates, one who can represent the more bishops with a more traditional bent, the other someone known for more aggressively embracing Francis' reform agenda, who can

serve as a unity ticket for the body. The reform candidate is obvious: Seattle Archbishop Paul Etienne. He hails from a diocese that is growing, with immigrant communities drawn from Asia as well as Latin America. Etienne has embraced environmental protection close to home, working with a developer known for creating sustainable buildings, to redevelop properties around the Cathedral of St. James. Firmly pro-life, Etienne is a consistent ethic of life champion in the manner of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

There are two available candidates for the more conservative slot on a unity slate: Baltimore Archbishop William Lori and Brownsville Bishop Daniel Flores. Both are conservatives who shun the culture wars. Lori's protégé was the late Cardinal James Hickey, a man of the conference, champion of human rights in Latin America and profound advocate for the poor. As supreme chaplain to the Knights of Columbus, Lori sometimes appeared on the barricades of the culture wars, but my sense is that with the change in lay leadership at the Knights, they are moving in a less contentious manner too.

Lori is also a man of ideas, someone who can listen to different opinions and try and forge a consensus, not a "my way or the highway" leader. This is important as the church continues to embrace the synodal path. An outspoken champion of better race relations, Lori is also stepping up to propose a "radical solidarity" with pregnant women as a necessary stance for the pro-life movement in the post-Roe political and cultural landscape.

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Flores has all these attributes too. He is one of the most brilliant bishops in the country, an effective communicator and, unlike some conservative prelates, he understands Pope Francis, not least because he is familiar with the Latino literature that has so formed the pope. Flores is also someone the bishops have already chosen for leadership positions, but there is the rub. He currently chairs the doctrine committee and is the perfect person to lead that committee at this time. One of the most profound influences on Flores' thinking is the great French philosopher Jacques Maritain, and it would be hard to imagine someone whose intellectual landscape is more conducive to healing this polarized time than Maritain.

This is why Flores should stay as chair of the doctrine committee. As the bishops begin the difficult task of redrafting "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," a teaching document on Catholics' political responsibility, Flores is perfectly positioned to carry out that delicate work, not least because he has a knack for communicating via social media. His tweets as "Amigo de Frodo" are more creative than those of any other bishop. In its current 46-page iteration, Faithful Citizenship is read by precisely no one, so it needs to be redone in a way that makes it more accessible, especially to younger Catholics who are learning how to form their consciences. (There are other issues with Faithful Citizenship that I will address on Wednesday.)

The other candidates seem unlikely to win. San Antonio Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller has been forthright in his criticisms of former President Donald Trump and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott. But those same criticisms make him an unlikely unifying force in a conference that is still very conservative. Arlington Bishop Michael Burbridge likely turned off many bishops when he invited Retired Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput to give a talk a few weeks before the election, which is like playing with matches in a forest during a drought. I would be surprised if Bridgeport Bishop Frank Caggiano or Fort Wayne-South Bend Bishop Kevin Rhoades emerged as serious candidates, but Oklahoma City Archbishop Paul Coakley could be the sleeper candidate.

The U.S. bishops' conference has become divided and the current synodal process is an opportunity to forge unity throughout the church. What a shame it would be if the U.S. bishops failed to use these elections to help come together as a cohesive body once again.

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2022** feature series. View the full series.