Opinion
Editorial



Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, gestures during a Nov. 15 news conference after being elected president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops during the fall general assembly of the bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

by NCR Editorial Staff

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

November 17, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

On the first day of the U.S. bishops' conference plenary meeting, speaker after speaker called for unity, a spirit of listening and synodality, and an effective witness not limited by stale debates and harmful divisions.

"We cannot credibly speak in a polarized society as long as our own house is divided," said Baltimore Archbishop William Lori, in his report as head of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities. "The more united we are, the more effective will our witness be."

Just minutes before Lori's speech, however, he had lost a vote for the presidency of the bishops' conference to Archbishop Timothy Broglio, who heads the Archdiocese for the Military Services.

Lori is no liberal, but he was seen as a moderate among the deeply divided bishops. But instead of a unity candidate, the bishops instead chose a culture warrior known for opposing the priorities of Pope Francis.

Broglio has blamed homosexuality for the clergy abuse crisis, sought religious exemptions for the coronavirus vaccines, and has a history that includes working as the private secretary to the late Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the former Vatican secretary of state who was a defender of serial sex abuser then-Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado of the Legionaries of Christ.

In a press conference following his election, Broglio brushed off a question about Sodano, saying, "Hindsight is always 20/20." And he doubled down on homosexuality and sex abuse, saying, "It's certainly an aspect of the sexual crisis that can't be denied." Academic studies have found no such relationship.

It was not an encouraging performance.

Advertisement

After the past three turbulent years, the credibility of the body of bishops could hardly be lower. Under its previous president, Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, the conference chose to insist that abortion is the "preeminent" issue in Catholic teaching; spent a year debating whether to deny Communion to pro-choice politicians before settling on a tepid statement; and in general let the right wing in the church define their agenda.

Now, as Pope Francis has identified synodality and openness to dialogue as the way forward for the church, the U.S. bishops seem out of step. They talk about unity, but remained divided themselves, with the final presidential vote 138 to 99 for Broglio.

Actions speak louder than words.

After losing the presidential vote, Lori was elected vice president of the conference, so there was some hope that he may be a moderating influence on the executive committee. But on the morning of the meeting's second day, elections for other positions indicated a near sweep for conservative candidates. Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City defeated Newark Cardinal Joseph Tobin for secretary. New committee chairs included Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois; and Bishop Michael Burbidge of Arlington, Virginia.

Clearly a majority in the body of bishops still prefer a culture warrior mentality, despite the lack of effectiveness of such a strategy in the church and society.

Lori's address as pro-life chair was titled, "Presentation on Life Issues and Opportunities Following the Dobbs Decision"—just days after the U.S. midterm elections in which all anti-abortion initiatives failed, in both blue and red states, despite massive spending on the part of dioceses in those states.

Meanwhile, Mass attendance is down at parishes and large numbers of young people are still heading for the exits. Despite Pope Francis' attempts to be a more welcoming church, the U.S. bishops seem to be stuck in the same old way of doing things.

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

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 25-Dec 8, 2022** print issue under the headline: Bishops’ culture warrior choice a mistake.