

Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, speaks from the floor during the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore Nov. 11, 2019. (CNS/Bob Roller)



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The Vatican has launched a formal investigation of the east Texas diocese led by Bishop Joseph Strickland, a controversial prelate who has accused Pope Francis of undermining the Catholic faith, a diocesan spokeswoman has confirmed.

Elizabeth Slaten, the communications director for the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, told NCR on June 26 that the investigation, known as an apostolic visitation, occurred over "a series of days" the previous week, but she declined to comment further on who conducted the visitation or its purpose.

"The whole process was very confidential," Slaten said. "The whole thing was conducted by the Holy See. We respect their processes. I'm not free to speak on behalf of Mother Church and the nuncio."

The Apostolic Nunciature in Washington D.C. — the Vatican's embassy in the United States — did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment. News of the visitation was first reported over the weekend by the far-right Catholic outlet Church Militant.

Commissioned by the Vatican, an apostolic visitation is often related to whether someone in leadership, such as a bishop or abbot, is able to govern in "appropriate and effective ways," Mercy Sr. Sharon Euart, a canon lawyer and executive director of the Resource Center for Religious Institutes, told NCR in a recent interview for a story on an apostolic visitation in the Knoxville, Tennessee, Diocese.

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Appointed by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012 to become the Tyler diocese's fourth bishop, Strickland in recent years has cultivated the public persona of an outspoken firebrand who does not hesitate to challenge the current pope's leadership or criticize his fellow bishops in public.

On May 12, Strickland, a self-described "red-pilled" bishop, questioned Francis' fidelity to the Catholic faith in a tweet in which he sought to distance himself from statements made by a far-right Catholic podcaster who has questioned whether Francis is the real bishop of Rome.

In that tweet, Strickland wrote, "I believe Pope Francis is the Pope but it is time for me to say that I reject his program of undermining the Deposit of Faith. Follow Jesus."

In an October 2020 interview, Strickland said the church was "weak" and "not clear" under Francis' leadership, and dared the pope to "fire him." On Twitter, Strickland has endorsed videos attacking the current pontiff as a "diabolically disordered clown."

With nearly 124,000 followers on Twitter, slightly more than the total number of Catholics in his diocese, Strickland has also used his social media platform to spread anti-vaccine messages during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to undermine other bishops by voicing support for priests whom those prelates had disciplined in their own dioceses.

Strickland has also at times taken hardline partisan political stances, describing President Joseph Biden — a Catholic who supports abortion rights — as an "evil president." In 2020, Strickland endorsed a controversial video in which the reactionary priest Fr. James Altman claimed that Catholics could not vote for Democrats in political elections. Strickland subsequently addressed a rally organized by supporters of former President Donald Trump who were seeking to overturn Biden's election victory.

This story will be updated as more information becomes available.