News



Pope Francis greets Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, during a meeting with U.S. bishops from Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas during their ad limina visits to the Vatican Jan. 20, 2020. Strickland tweeted May 12 that he "rejects" Pope Francis' "program of undermining the Deposit of Faith."(CNS/Vatican Media)



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November 11, 2023
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The Vatican announced Nov. 11 that Pope Francis had effectively fired Texas Bishop Joseph Strickland, a firebrand prelate who in recent years questioned the safety of the coronavirus vaccines, called synodality "garbage," and endorsed a video that attacked Francis himself as a "diabolically disoriented clown."

In a short note in the daily press bulletin, the Vatican said Strickland, who had served as the leader of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, since 2012, had been "relieved" of his post by Francis. That language, not typical in Vatican diplomatic speak, appeared to indicate that Strickland, age 65, had refused requests to resign. The prelate had been subject to an official Vatican investigation into his leadership.

"The shocking part for me was not that [Strickland] was going against Pope Francis, but seeing a Catholic bishop behaving like a fundamentalist Protestant in being so dismissive of the idea that there is a church authority that he has to obey," said Massimo Faggioli, a theologian and church historian at Villanova University.

> Please allow me to clarify regarding, “Patrick Coffin has challenged the authenticity of the Pope Francis.” If this is accurate I disagree, 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.
>
> — Bishop J. Strickland (@Bishopoftyler) May 13, 2023

Faggioli told NCR that Strickland's posts on X, the social media platform previously known as Twitter, where he once accused the pope of "undermining the Deposit of Faith," was "the strangest behavior by a bishop" that the theologian had seen in the age of social media.

"In his tweets," Faggioli said, "It was almost like he was saying, 'Jesus told me to do this, Jesus told me to say that,' which in some other churches might be acceptable

but it is certainly not the way in which the Catholic Church understands unity and the responsibility of a bishop."

Francis appointed Austin Bishop Joe Vásquez as apostolic administrator of the Tyler diocese, entrusting him to lead until a new bishop is appointed. Across the diocese, news of Strickland's removal reverberated quickly.

Some Catholics in the Tyler Diocese were not surprised and told NCR that the pope's move to sideline the outspoken conservative prelate was long overdue.

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"People have been writing to the nuncio [Vatican ambassador] for years about [Strickland], all related to how he was running his diocese," said Cindy Plummer, a former diocesan official who was among several female diocesan employees abruptly laid off in 2018.

In June, the Vatican launched a formal investigation, known as an apostolic visitation, into the Tyler Diocese. A priest who was interviewed for the visitation told NCR that retired Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona, and Bishop Dennis Sullivan of Camden, New Jersey, conducted the visitation. He said the bishops, accompanied by two priests, asked several questions related to financial matters, Strickland's leadership style and how it affected the morale of the priests in his diocese.

The priest, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the confidentiality the investigating bishops asked of him, also said they asked questions about priests and religious men and women with irregular canonical statuses taking up residence in the Tyler Diocese in recent years. In addition, the priest said the bishops asked him what he thought Strickland understood the "deposit of faith to mean," and whether the priest thought Strickland's episcopacy was "salvageable." The priest said he told the bishops it was not.



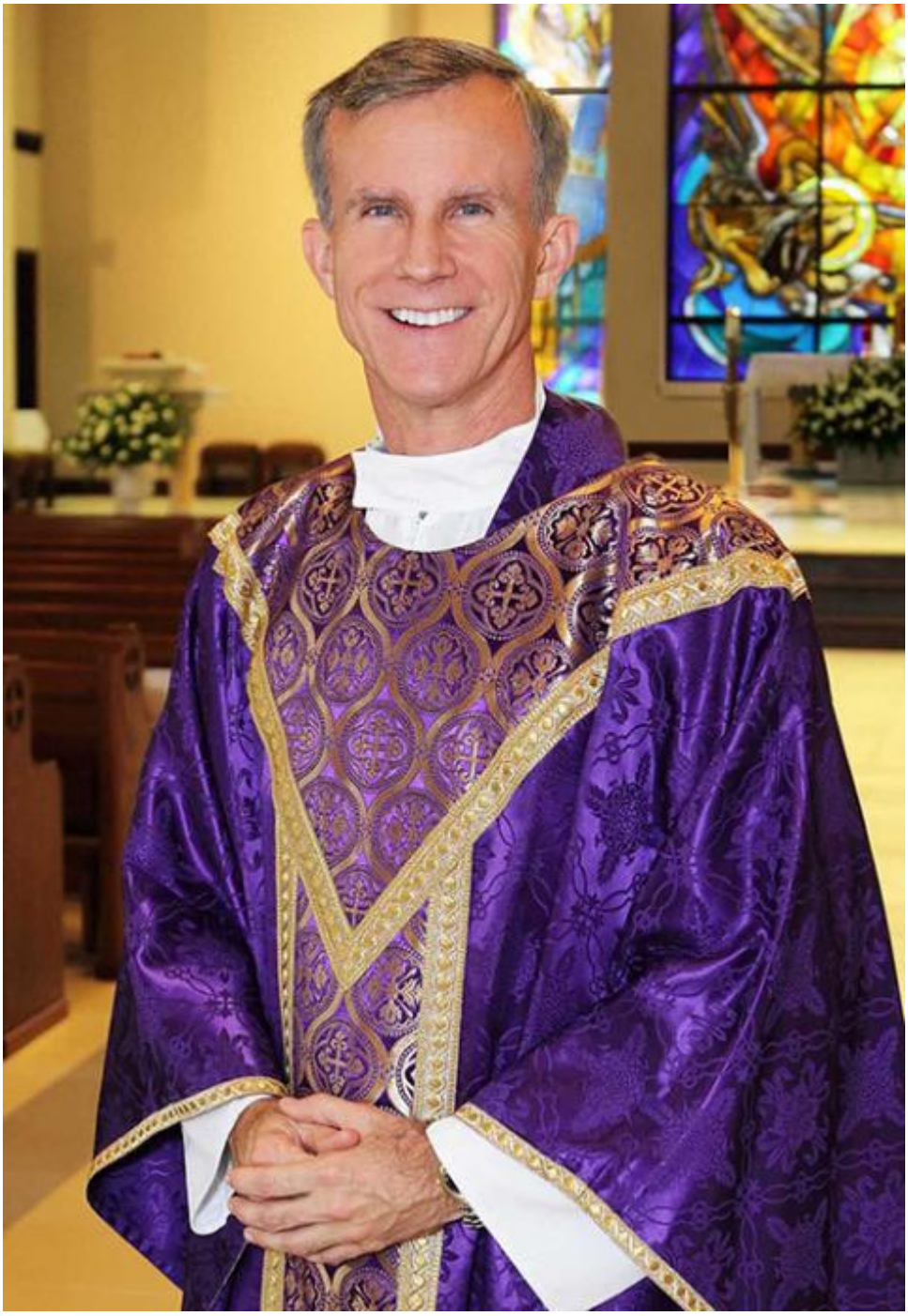
Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, walks in a procession June 16 in Los Angeles, to protest the Los Angeles Dodgers honoring the "Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence" drag group during the team's LGBTQ+ Pride Night at Dodger Stadium. (OSV News/Reuters/USA TODAY Sports/Kirby Lee)

On X, the platform that Strickland often used to attack his perceived ideological opponents while promoting his allies, Strickland presented himself as a bishop being harassed for standing strong in the faith. A few days after news reporting regarding the apostolic visitation, Strickland posted an article critical of the LGBTQ rights movement, and added: "I can't remain silent even if it means that I am silenced."

Plummer disputed her bishop's statements insinuating that the Vatican targeted him for speaking out in defense of the Catholic faith.

"He perpetuates this narrative that this all happened because of what he says," Plummer said. "It's not true, and he knows it's not true."

Amanda Martínez Beck, the former managing editor for the Tyler Diocese's magazine, told NCR that Strickland's strident rhetoric and partisanship, which he amplified on social media, left her a disillusioned, lapsed Catholic.



Then Bishop-designate Joseph Strickland is pictured in a 2011 photo. He was appointed bishop by Pope Benedict XVI Sept. 29, 2012. (CNS/Courtesy of Bishop T.K. Gorman Regional Catholic School/Felipe Natera)

"I don't know if I'll go back to Mass," said Beck, who often responded to Strickland's public posts on X, urging him to rethink the tone and content of his statements. She said Strickland never responded to her concerns.

"It's really angering," Beck said.

Fr. Tim Kelly, a parish priest in the Tyler diocese who clashed with Strickland, told NCR that Strickland "used to be a nice, unassuming, likable man" until he reached a sort of "celebrity" status among hardline conservative Catholics. Kelly said the bishop "ruined lives and ruptured decades-old friendships," as his stature grew in traditionalist circles.

"Families have stopped going to Mass because of his unkind words," Kelly said. "He needs time for reflection. He needs time to rebuild the bridges he burned when anger and certainty of his own righteousness consumed him."

Installed as the Tyler Diocese's fourth bishop in 2012, Strickland in recent years cultivated the public persona of an outspoken firebrand who did not hesitate to challenge the current pope's leadership or to criticize his fellow bishops in public.

Strickland's prominence in conservative Catholic circles began to skyrocket after he wrote a public letter in August 2018 vouching for the credibility of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the former Vatican ambassador to the United States.

Strickland released his letter after Viganò had published a "testimony" where he called on Pope Francis to resign and accused the pope of lifting ecclesial sanctions on Theodore McCarrick, the former cardinal whom the Vatican laicized in 2019 after finding him guilty of sexual abuse allegations.

In his letter, Strickland said he found Viganò's allegations against Francis "to be credible," and he directed the priests in his diocese to immediately post his letter on their parish websites and social media accounts.

In the years following the Viganò affair, Strickland became a favorite prelate among Catholics on the right who saw him as a rare truth-teller in the hierarchy who had the courage to stand up to the modern secular world and its liberalizing values. Far-right Catholic media figures and outlets presented him as "America's bishop," featured him in fawning interviews, and provided him the opportunity to co-host a weekly Internet radio show. Viganò, who since his 2018 testimony has taken to

releasing conspiratorial manifestos from an undisclosed location, has himself on occasion praised Strickland.

Faggioli said Strickland's brand of intense devotional Catholicism, intertwined with an apocalyptic strain that sees evil threatening to overcome the world at any moment, resonates with a certain Catholic culture in the United States that leans anti-intellectual, and understands the Catholic faith to be a matter of firmly believing in a few principles while viewing synodal dialogue and discernment to be "rubbish."

"He speaks for a certain kind [of Catholic] in this country, one that we don't see because we're in our bubbles," Faggioli said.

> A sad commentary on the Church and state in our time. We need to wake up and stand for Truth. Jesus Christ is the Face of Truth. Again to this I say Viva Cristo Rey. .....Pope Francis, Nancy Pelosi & the Tyrannical Culture of Death https://t.co/PX9lo90dWv via @YouTube
>
> — Bishop J. Strickland (@Bishopoftyler) July 8, 2022

Strickland used his growing profile to become a vocal critic of Francis. In recent years, Strickland had invited the pope to "fire" him and endorsed a video attacking the pontiff as a "diabolically disoriented clown." On May 12, Strickland posted on X that he believed Francis was "undermining the Deposit of Faith."

If those statements had Strickland teetering on the edge of schism, as some of his critics suggested, the bishop could still count on support from mainstream conservative Catholics.

In early September, Janet Smith, a seminary professor who writes in conservative Catholic publications and is a sought-after speaker, participated in a two-day "Defending Our Faith" conference in Tyler. Scott Hahn, the well-known theologian from Franciscan University of Steubenville, commended Strickland's "inspiring words" in a pastoral letter the bishop wrote in advance of the Synod of Synodality. On Oct. 14, Hahn was the advertised feature speaker for a one-day speaking conference in Tyler.

Strickland's criticisms and defiance of Francis dovetailed with a decadelong conservative Catholic resistance to Francis. That resistance, much of it located in the

Anglophone world, has criticized the current pope for deemphasizing issues like abortion in favor of social justice concerns such as climate change. Strickland and other conservative prelates have fought back against the current pontiff's reform agenda, which includes the effort to make the church a more welcoming space for LGBTQ people and for Catholics whose lives do not conform to official church teachings.



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

Like many other prominent conservative churchmen, Strickland has resisted the "synodal conversion" that Francis has called for in the effort to recapture an element of communal discernment in the early church where bishops consulted the faithful.

While Francis has described synodality as "what God expects of the church in the third millennium," Strickland struck a different note during an interview in 2020: "All

this synodality is garbage as far as I'm concerned. It just is not living the truth."

In the provocative three-page pastoral letter he released on Aug. 22, Strickland predicted that many of the "basic truths" of the Catholic faith would be challenged during the October meeting in Rome of the Synod of Bishops on synodality.

In that letter, Strickland warned of an "evil and false message" that he said had "invaded" the church. He also declared that the synod would reveal "the true schismatics."

> As the Bishop of Tyler I endorse Fr Altman's statement in this video. My shame is that it has taken me so long. Thank you Fr Altman for your COURAGE. If you love Jesus & His Church & this nation...pleases HEED THIS MESSAGE https://t.co/D413G0lfQV
>
> — Bishop J. Strickland (@Bishopoftyler) September 5, 2020

With nearly 124,000 followers on X, slightly more than the total number of Catholics in his diocese, Strickland 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 himself often took 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, "You cannot be Catholic and be a Democrat."

In December 2020, Strickland addressed a rally in Washington, D.C., organized by supporters of then-President Donald Trump who were seeking to overturn Biden's election victory.

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 24-Dec 7, 2023** print issue under the headline: Pope Francis axes firebrand Texas Bishop Strickland, darling of right-wing Twitter.