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Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, gives the annual Cardina

Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, gives the annual Cardinal Dearden Lecture at the Catholic University of America in Washington April 26, 2023. Pierre will be elevated to the church's College of Cardinals Sept. 30. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic University of America/Patrick Ryan)



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Pope Francis' ambassador to the United States admonished Catholic bishops who claim to adhere to papal authority, while at the same time openly criticizing the current pontiff.

"The pope is not an idea. Some people say 'I am with the pope, but not with this one.' And they are mistaken. The pope is a real person," said Cardinal-designate Christophe Pierre on Sept. 29. "When the Lord chose Peter, he didn't choose an idea, he chose Peter and he said 'I choose you and I will build my church on you.' "

Pierre's remarks came in a brief interview with NCR just one day before the pope is set to elevate him to the church's College of Cardinals, the elite body that will one

day elect Francis' successor.

While Pierre did not name any names, the controversial case of Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, has dominated headlines in the U.S. Following a recent Vatican investigation into the management of his diocese, Strickland, a social media firebrand, has indicated that he would not willingly resign his position if the pope requested it.

Strickland has previously said that while he accepts that Francis is pope, he "reject[s] his program of undermining the Deposit of Faith."

Originally from France, Pierre, 77, is a veteran Vatican diplomat who has represented the Holy See in Mexico, Uganda and Haiti and continues to serve in the U.S. despite having reached the traditional retirement age of bishops at 75.

In 2016, Francis appointed Pierre as his ambassador, formally known as an apostolic nuncio, to the United States. Pierre succeeded the now-disgraced former nuncio to the U.S., Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, a QAnon conspiracy theorist who has previously called for the pope's resignation.

Pierre has largely sought to encourage the U.S. hierarchy to embrace Francis' reforms and his years-long process to reinvigorate the Synod of Bishops. In a remarkable turn of phrase during an address to the U.S. bishops' June 2023 assembly, Pierre told the prelates that "maybe we are still struggling to understand" the pope's intentions.

In recent years, some U.S. bishops and church leaders have criticized Francis, claiming that being from Latin America, he does not fully understand the Catholic Church in the United States.

Pierre countered those critics in his NCR interview, saying that "my experience is that Pope Francis understands very well the U.S. church."

"It's good that we have a pope that makes provocations, because this is a real pope," he added. "He's not an idea, the pope is a person."

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In his role as the Vatican's ambassador to the United States, Pierre is responsible for helping identify and vet potential bishops for the U.S. church.

Despite the sometimes tense relationship between Francis and the U.S. episcopacy, on the eve of receiving his cardinal's red hat from the pope, Pierre struck a conciliatory tone.

"The pope listens to the bishops and the bishops listen to the pope and we have to learn to dialogue with each other," he said. "We are to enter into a real dialogue. The pope is the pope and bishops should always listen to the pope."

He also offered advice for reactionaries who struggle to embrace the pope's priorities: "If the pope says something, don't criticize him. Make an examination of conscience."

And despite his diplomatic finesse, the ambassador also didn't mince words about who is in charge: "Let the pope be the pope, let the bishops be the bishops."

Next week, on Oct. 4, Francis is set to release a hotly-anticipated document on the environment that is meant to serve as a follow-up to his landmark 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si*', in which the pontiff embraced the scientific consensus on the need for global efforts to confront climate change.

Some U.S. bishops have lamented that the U.S. church has been sluggish in its response to the pope's call to action.

Pierre said he hopes that the new document — titled *Laudate Deum* ("Praise God") — can help the U.S. church double down on its environmental concerns.

"Prioritizing doesn't mean to forget everything else," he said. "It's a point of attention."

"Imagine a Catholic Church not being attentive to the environment," said Pierre. "Thank God the church is continuing its reflection."

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