Opinion
NCR Voices



Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, speaks Nov. 16, 2021, during a session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. The bishops will meet Nov. 13-16 in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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Greetings from Baltimore! The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops begins its autumn plenary (Nov. 13-16) today, but there are no public sessions today. So, instead of telling you we will have commentary later this morning on the addresses from the head of the conference and from the nuncio, all we can really say is that the bishops are huddled in small group sessions. This is frustrating for us in the press room, but we can hope this more synodal approach helps the bishops find a way to come together.

It would make more sense to me if they had heard some reports from those who participated in the synod in Rome first, and then went into small group discussions. Still, these small groups were welcomed across the ideological spectrum last year. It allowed bishops to get to know each other, instead of relying only on the bishops of their region. And, anything that helps overcome the polarization within the conference gets the benefit of the doubt.

The effects of that polarization burst onto the bishops' agenda Saturday morning (Nov. 11) when Pope Francis relieved Bishop Joseph Strickland from the pastoral governance of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas. The bishop's attacks on Pope Francis were extreme, but they differed in degree, but only partially in kind, from more subtle attacks. The conference's secretary, Archbishop Paul Coakley, was one of the 40 or so bishops who issued a statement attesting to the integrity of Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano when the now-disgraced former nuncio called on Pope Francis to resign in 2018. That statement lacks the unhinged quality of Strickland's comments, but both are antithetical to the affective collegiality all bishops should show to the Holy Father, to say nothing of the vows of obedience they swore on the Gospels. Strickland was an outlier, but to say he was alone is not accurate, either.

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Regrettably, the bishops are unlikely, in small groups or in plenary sessions, to alter the language in the introductory note to "Faithful Citizenship" about abortion being a "preeminent concern." That assertion undermines the idea that the bishops are forming consciences not replacing them. Surely, the decision about which issue to prioritize, and in which electoral contest, is the very essence of prudential judgment and conscientious choice.

One change the bishops should make, but haven't, has to do with their own elections. The conference should ask those standing for committee chair elections to prepare a short statement, written or oral, about why they agreed to be nominated. As it is, the names are selected by the Committee on Plans and Priorities, and the bishop with the best reputation, or the one who is best connected, tends to win. Better to have them all say, briefly, "If you select me, I am thinking this committee should prioritize these three things" or words to that effect.

I hope we will pick up snippets of information today, but am afraid you will have to wait for tomorrow for news. My colleagues Joshua McElwee, Brian Fraga and Aleja Hertzler-McCain arrive today and we will all be posting as news breaks, so be sure to return to our homepage the way they vote in Chicago: early and often!

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2023** feature series. View the full series.