News



Bishop Joseph Strickland, who was removed from pastoral governance of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, by Pope Francis Nov. 11, 2023, leads the recitation of the rosary Nov. 15 outside the site of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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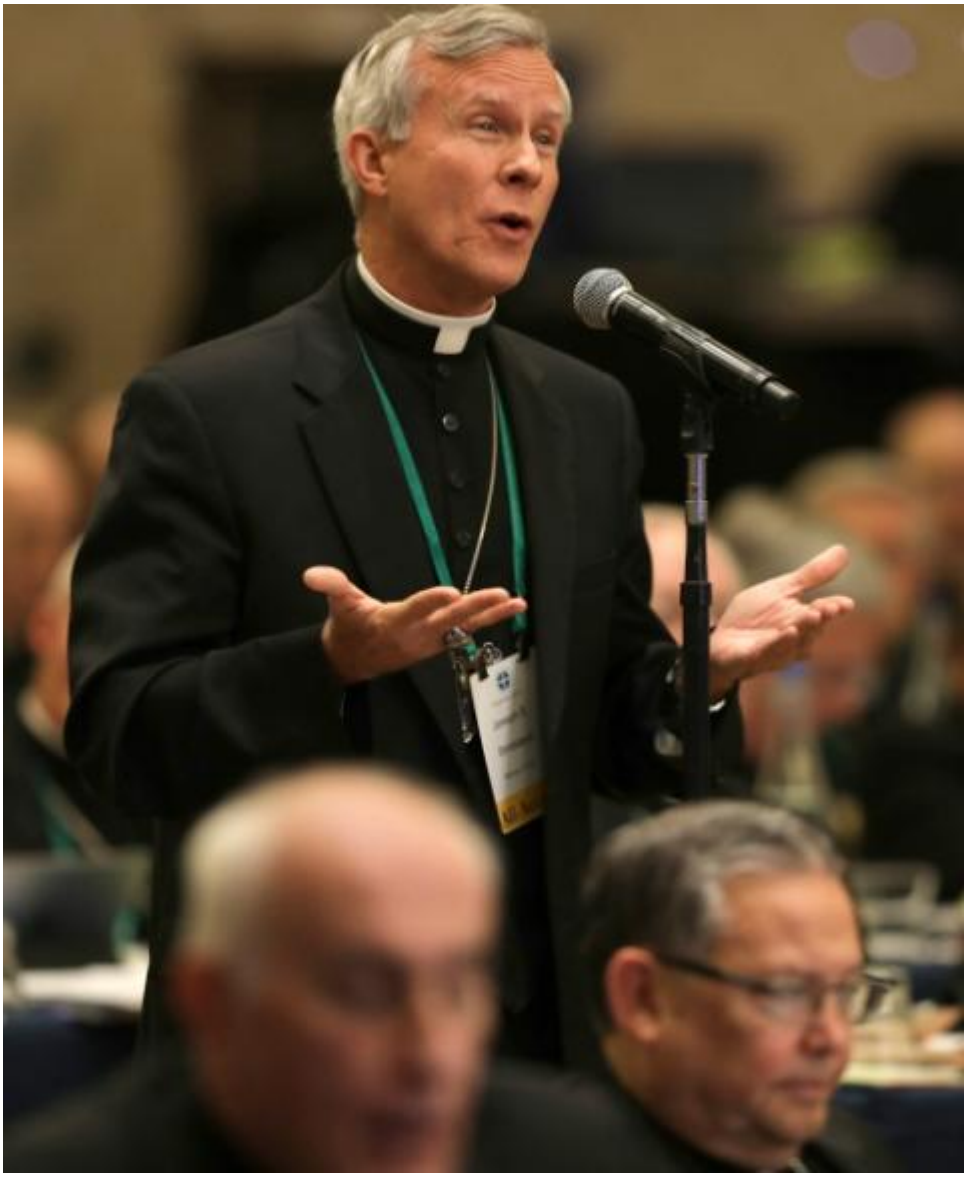
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Bishop Joseph Strickland will be the keynote speaker in late February at a major gala for conservative activists and Republican officials a little more than three months after Pope Francis removed him from his leadership of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas.

Strickland, an outspoken cleric whose popularity among conservative Catholics has not dimmed since the pope effectively fired him Nov. 11 after a Vatican investigation into his management and leadership style, is set to speak Feb. 23 at the Conservative Political Action Conference's annual Ronald Reagan Dinner in Washington, D.C.

"We are honored to have this courageous Catholic leader take this important role during @CPAC," Matt Schlapp, the chairman of CPAC and former co-chair of the Catholics for Trump campaign group in 2020, posted Jan. 26 on X.

Schlapp, who in January 2023 was accused of sexually assaulting a campaign aide for Herschel Walker's failed senatorial run in Georgia, told the right-wing outlet Newsmax that Strickland will also celebrate Mass for Catholic attendees attending CPAC's Feb. 21-24 conference. (Schlapp, through his attorney, denied the aide's accusations.)



Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, speaks from the floor during the U.S. bishops' assembly in Baltimore Nov. 11, 2019. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Strickland is not the first right-wing Catholic cleric to be given a platform at CPAC after being chastened by church authorities. In 2021, Fr. James Altman, a renegade priest who was removed from his La Crosse, Wisconsin, parish for being divisive, delivered a blessing and sat down for an interview during a CPAC conference in Dallas.

The news of Strickland participating in a forum attended by far-right activists such as Steve Bannon, Jack Posobiec, Sebastian Gorka and Kari Lake, among others, raised eyebrows among some of Strickland's critics in his home diocese.

"Is he going into politics now or running for office?" said Cindy Plummer, a former diocesan official who was among several female diocesan employees abruptly laid off by Strickland in 2018.

Amanda Martínez Beck, the former managing editor for the Tyler Diocese's magazine, told NCR that Strickland's participation in CPAC is all about "pandering to a conservative base who wants to be reactionary against the specter of the left — which Pope Francis is on, according to those who have a stake in CPAC."

Beck said Strickland's strident rhetoric and partisanship, which he amplified on social media, left her a disillusioned, lapsed Catholic. "The church is a political entity — how can it not be with people's lives and dignity at stake? — but it is not supposed to be partisan," Beck said.

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In June 2023, the Vatican launched a formal investigation, known as an apostolic visitation, into the Tyler Diocese. Those interviewed told NCR that the bishops conducting the visitation asked them about Strickland's handling of financial matters and his management style, including its effects on priestly morale.

On Nov. 11, the Vatican announced that Strickland had been "relieved" of his post. Galveston-Houston archbishop Cardinal Daniel DiNardo said in a statement that the pope removed Strickland after he refused requests to resign.

Strickland's removal from episcopal ministry followed a string of controversies in recent years in which he had taken to social media to attack Francis, accusing the pope of undermining the Catholic faith and endorsing a video that described the pontiff as a "diabolically disoriented clown."

Since 2020, the now former bishop of Tyler had also questioned the safety of the coronavirus vaccines, endorsed a video suggesting that Catholics could not vote for Democratic candidates and addressed a political rally that sought to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Strickland's strident rhetoric and hardline positions may have torpedoed his episcopal career, but they also endeared him to conservative and right-wing Catholics who liked his outspoken and blunt approach to ecclesial and political

matters.

Since being fired by Francis, Strickland has prayed with supporters in Baltimore outside the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' plenary, and launched an overhauled personal website where he posts letters to priests urging them to greater piety. Strickland has been feted with awards by groups like Priests for Life and he continues to be outspoken on church matters, most recently urging Catholic bishops to reject Francis' move in December to allow priests in some instances to bless gay couples and others in irregular personal living situations.