News



Pope Francis greets Bishop Robert Gruss of Saginaw, Michigan, during a meeting with U.S. bishops from Ohio and Michigan making their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican Dec. 10, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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A Catholic bishop in Michigan vilified President Joe Biden as a "stupid" Catholic "who is not living the life Jesus wants for him" during a presentation after a celebration of daily Mass.

During a reflection on "Forgiveness as the Heart of Christianity," Bishop Robert Gruss of Saginaw told attendees at the Cathedral of Mary of the Assumption April 5 that he has no personal animus toward Biden, a fellow Catholic.

"I don't have any anger toward the president. I feel sorry for him. I'm not angry at him, he's just stupid," Gruss said.

During his presentation, which was posted on the Saginaw Diocese's YouTube account, Gruss suggested that Biden, a Democrat whose support for abortion rights has rankled several bishops over the years, "doesn't understand the Catholic faith."

The bishop also said that Biden demonstrates ignorance "in the sense of not knowing."

"It's not stupidity in a derogatory way. It's stupidity in the sense of he doesn't know until he does things," said Gruss, whose comments elicited laughter from some audience members.

"So I'm not angry at him, I feel sorry for him, that's different," Gruss said.

He spent about a minute of his nearly hourlong presentation talking about Biden.

A spokesman for the Saginaw Diocese did not comment or make Gruss available for an interview with NCR.

Gruss' comments on the president's intellect and personal faith provide a new example of the pointed criticisms that some U.S. Catholic prelates have repeatedly made against Biden since his election in November 2020.

"It's impolite to call anybody stupid, and it's disrespectful to call the president of the United States stupid," said Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, a journalist who has covered the bishops for decades.

Reese told NCR that some observers may see Gruss' remarks as evidence that the U.S. Catholic hierarchy is aligned with the Republican Party and that the bishops view Biden through a partisan lens informed by right-wing politics.

"The bishops have always been after Biden because of the abortion issue," Reese said. "They went after [former President Donald Trump] on issues like immigration, health care and concern for the poor, but they've always been loudest about abortion."

Biden's campaign promise to "protect" abortion rights clashes with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' decision in November 2023 to again prioritize the "threat of abortion" as the "preeminent priority" for the bishops' political guidance to Catholic voters in the year leading up to the 2024 presidential election.

Several outspoken conservative prelates wanted the bishops conference in 2021 to declare that Catholic politicians like Biden should not receive Communion if they support abortion rights. Many of those same bishops often criticize Biden on social media, where they expressed strong disapproval in October 2021 when Pope Francis met with Biden at the Vatican.

Even bishops considered to be moderates have at times used public forums to call out the president, who attends Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation. During a March 31 appearance on the CBS Sunday morning show "Face the Nation," Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington, D.C., described Biden as a "cafeteria Catholic."

Reese said it is "imprudent" for Catholic bishops to comment on politicians during an election year. But when discussing politics, Reese said prelates should highlight where candidates' positions align and clash with Catholic teaching on a range of issues.

"To only talk about one [issue] is to give the impression that you are endorsing a candidate, which traditionally the bishops have been smart enough not to do," Reese said.

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In addition to his comments on April 5, Gruss has at times used his account on X, the social media platform previously known as Twitter, to share commentary critical of

Biden.

On March 30, Gruss shared a post where Bishop Joseph Strickland described Biden as a "lost soul." Strickland, who once also accused the pope of undermining the Catholic faith, was removed from his leadership of the Tyler, Texas, diocese in November 2023 following a Vatican investigation over his management style.

Named the bishop of Saginaw by Francis in May 2019, Gruss has described himself as an introverted "cowboy at heart" who enjoys hunting, fishing, hiking, as well as riding horses and Harley Davidson motorcycles.

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A corporate airline pilot and flight instructor before entering seminary in the early 1990s, Gruss served as vice rector of the Pontifical North American College in Rome before being ordained the bishop of Rapid City in South Dakota in July 2011.

During his April 5 talk at the Saginaw cathedral, Gruss said he does not let Biden "control" his life by dwelling on resentment. He instead described feeling sad for the present occupant in the White House.

"Because he's not living the life Jesus wants for him," Gruss said. "His life could be so much more, just like ours could be if we're living the life Jesus wants for us."

After ending his remarks on Biden, Gruss said, "I'll get off my soapbox here now. I said it, now I got it off my chest." The bishop then returned to his reflections on the need for prayer and forgiveness.