News



Bishops listen to speakers June 13, 2024, at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Spring Plenary Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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The U.S. Catholic bishops will gather in Baltimore for their annual fall assembly a week after a contentious national election where former President Donald Trump secured his bid to return to the White House by defeating Vice President Kamala Harris.

The agenda for the Nov. 11-14 plenary session does not call for a public discussion of the Nov. 5 election. But observers expect that the political fallout will hang over the proceedings and will likely be a topic of conversation during the bishops' closed-door executive sessions.

Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued a prepared statement Nov. 6 where he congratulated Trump for his victory while adding that the task now was to "move from campaigning to governing" and to "transition peacefully from one government to the next."



Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, speaks during a news conference at a Nov. 14, 2023, session of the bishops' fall general assembly in Baltimore. Broglio issued a bishops' conference statement Nov. 6, calling for prayer and unity following the results of the presidential election. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Other bishops issued their own conciliatory statements in the days following the election, including Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Cardinals Wilton Gregory of Washington and Blase Cupich of Chicago.

But Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, raised concerns over Trump's victory.



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky (CNS/Bob Roller)

"I feel like I don't know my own country any more," Stowe said in a statement provided to National Catholic Reporter.

Stowe said: "With all that we know about Trump's disregard for the law, for the common good and for the dignity of women, the disabled, migrants, refugees, Africans, Haitians and so many more. What happened to the country with the noblest ideal and the commitment to democracy?"

Stowe's disappointment was shared by Catholics who have criticized the bishops' conference for adopting a political strategy that overlapped with the Republican Party's interests by emphasizing culture war issues like abortion and LGBTQ matters.

Massimo Faggioli, a theologian and church historian at Villanova University, told NCR that he did not expect the bishops' conference in its Nov. 12-13 public sessions to comment on the election results.

Though Broglio said neither the church nor bishops are aligned with any political party, Faggioli told NCR that the bishops' adoption of a culture war posture "has given birth to a constitutional agnosticism" among the prelates regarding the value of democracy and the dangers of populism.



Massimo Faggioli is professor of historical theology at Villanova University. (CNS/Chaz Muth)

"In part it's a paralysis due to the polarization, but it's also a failure to see the issue," Faggioli said. "It's interesting because the bishops themselves are victims of an ecclesial populism that casts, unfairly, all of them as corrupt and self-serving. Political populism does not spare religion."

Noting that voters on Nov. 5 approved seven of ten state-level abortion-rights amendments, Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, a journalist who has covered the bishops conference for decades, said it has become "clear that the bishops' pro-life political strategy has failed."

"They celebrated the overturning of *Roe* v. *Wade* two years ago, but ever since it's been one defeat after another," Reese said, adding that the Republican Party, which under Trump's leadership has moderated its position on abortion, has "abandoned" the bishops on the issue.

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> —Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, columnist for Religious News Service
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"The bishops have to take up their other strategy for dealing with abortion, which is to support government programs that help women and children," Reese said. "One of the biggest causes of abortion is finances, and to do that the bishops are going to have to reach across the aisle to Democrats, even feminists, and they're not used to doing that."

During Trump's first term in office, Reese said the bishops often distributed press releases that challenged his administration's policies on immigration, health care and government programs that benefit the poor.



Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese listens to speakers during a "Catholic Day of Action for Dreamers" protest to press Congress to protect "Dreamers" outside the U.S. Capitol Feb. 27, 2018, in Washington. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Observers said the bishops will need to find their collective voice if Trump carries out his campaign promise to launch a mass deportation program of undocumented immigrants living in the United States. The bishops in Baltimore are slated to receive an update from their migration committee.

According to the Center for Migration Studies, a Scalabrinian think tank, mass deportation threatens to break up nearly 5 million American families and would damage long-standing communities. Faggioli said the bishops need to "denounce without hesitation" the anti-immigrant rhetoric of Trump and JD Vance, the vice president-elect.

"The church wants to be a *defensor civitatis*, a defender of its people, and this is an issue that will be decisive on the way as to how U.S. Catholicism will go down in history," Faggioli said. "Silence or vague statements about this will give arguments

to those who say that the Catholic Church in the United States has conformed to the idea that America is not a country, but just a business."

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The bishops in Baltimore will also receive a report on the Synod of Bishops on Synodality, the three-year consultative process that ended Oct. 26 in Rome. The synod's final report called on all baptized Catholics to shape the future of the church, as well as for increased transparency and accountability.

As to how the U.S. Catholic Church embraces synodality, which Pope Francis has said is what God expects of the church in the third millennium, remains to be seen. Cardinals Cupich of Chicago and Robert McElroy of San Diego have called on the bishops' conference to revamp its structures to reflect the pope's call for a synodal church.

Reese said that the bishops will need to decide what they are going to do regarding synodality.

"Are they going to embrace it or ignore it? I don't think the bishops are ready to embrace it for the most part. Synodality is seen by too many priests and bishops as a threat to their authority or a waste of time. I think they'll give it lip service, but they're not going to put a lot of effort into it."

Faggioli added that the Synod of Bishops on Synodality means "very different things for different churches."

"On some of the proposals, the U.S. church is far ahead of others, while on some other issues it is far behind," Faggioli said. "It will be interesting to see how the U.S. bishops who were at the synod will talk about the experience and the next chapter. There has to be from the bishops an ecclesial investment on a synodal conversion, even without using the term, which is still very abstract to many U.S. Catholics. What happens to synodality in the USA will say something about what happens to synodality in the global church."

Among other agenda items, the bishops at their assembly in Baltimore will review action items pertaining to liturgical texts, discuss the pastoral implementation of integral ecology and "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," receive a report on the 10th National Eucharistic Congress, and review the conference's 2025-2028

mission directive. The bishops will also vote for a new conference treasurer as well as chairmen for five committees.

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2024** feature series. View the full series.