News



The Rev. Thomas Hennen, recently appointed as bishop in Baker, Ore., by Pope Leo XIV. (Courtesy of Diocese of Davenport)



Aleja Hertzler-McCain

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

July 11, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Bishop-designate Thomas Hennen was appointed by Pope Leo XIV to lead the Diocese of Baker, Oregon, on July 10. At age 47, Hennen will be the youngest bishop leading a U.S. diocese.

Hennen's ministry to LGBTQ+ people has seen mixed reactions about his pastoral approach.

While ministering at the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa — his most recent post — Hennen spoke at a 2023 diocesan talk about ministry to LGBTQ+ Catholics. He said he had been working with Courage International, a Catholic group that encourages people "who experience same-sex attraction" to live in chastity, according to its website, for nearly the last eight years. His remarks signaled he backed current Catholic Church teaching on LGBTQ+ issues.

"We should not feel forced into choosing between truth and love," Hennen said. "The truth is ultimately loving. The way that the truth is expressed is not always loving, and that's what we have to navigate very carefully."

As president of Dignity Detroit, an LGBTQ+ Catholic group, Frank D'Amore told the Detroit Free Press, "Courage is like a 12-step program, which is kind of insulting." Using the allusion to a program for people experiencing addiction, he explained, "I don't need a 12-step program. It's ludicrous."

Former Ireland President Mary McAleese in 2019 called the group "Machiavellian, dangerous and deliberately specious" because it encourages LGBTQ+ people to suppress their identities.

But some voices on both the left and the right have claimed Hennen's bishop appointment as a win for greater LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church, particularly because of his participation on a Davenport diocesan committee that in 2023 released guidelines for pastoral issues surrounding "sexual and gender minorities," which were praised by some LGBTQ+ Catholics and advocates.

At the time, many dioceses were releasing guidelines requiring Catholic institutions to require people to use the names, pronouns, bathrooms and attire assigned at birth. However, the Davenport guidelines instructed the local church to take a "case-by-case approach," to love first, listen for understanding and have "a fundamental respect for the dignity of every human person, body and soul, created in the image and likeness of God."

"Our transgender siblings should be treated with respect, compassion and sensitivity," Hennen said in an article in the diocesan newspaper. "Are there some appropriate accommodations that we could make as a Church that neither 'sell out' on our beliefs nor slam the door in the face of transgender persons? I think there may be."

Advertisement

LGBTQ+ advocates praised the guidelines for emphasizing dignity and consulting with LGBTQ+ people. As a committee member and vicar general, Hennen did not have the final say on the guidelines, which were released by his bishop, Thomas Zinkula.

Bishop Joseph Strickland — who was removed as leader of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, by Pope Francis, after Strickland made accusations against the pope and allegedly mismanaged the diocese — reacted to Hennen's appointment on X, saying that Leo was "doubling down" on Francis' promotion of "the Lavender Mafia — a clandestine network within the Church hierarchy that protects and advances a homosexual ideology while masquerading under the banner of compassion."

Hennen will succeed retiring Bishop Liam Cary, who wrote in early 2024 that blessings for couples in "irregular situations" — like heterosexual couples living together outside marriage or gay couples — could not "be carried out scandal-free in the Diocese of Baker." He asked priests not to bless any couples living together outside church-approved marriages.

In Francis' *Fiducia supplicans*, a 2023 declaration, his doctrinal office allowed priests to bless those couples, including same-sex couples.

A lifelong Iowan who studied at several universities in Rome, including the prestigious seminary Pontifical North American College, Hennen has served as a

campus minister at St. Ambrose University and for the Newman Catholic Student Center at The University of Iowa. He's also served as a parish priest, a high school theology teacher and Davenport diocesan director of vocations. He speaks English, Spanish and Italian.

In Baker, he will shepherd 33,356 Catholics spread over 66,826 square miles.