Opinion
NCR Voices
Justin McLellan interviews Archbishop Paul Coakley.

Justin McLellan interviews Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City after he celebrated the ordination Mass for 18 new deacons from the Pontifical North American College in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Sept. 28, 2023. McLellan is NCR's new Vatican correspondent. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Nine months ago, after a long career in mainstream journalism at places like The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal, I took a huge career leap into a new job as executive editor of a scrappy but lovable 60-year-old nonprofit news organization, the National Catholic Reporter.

I had no preconceived notions and no grand plans — just little plans — plans to build value where I could, plans to make every story better, plans to boost investigative work and plans to showcase to the world the great work that our staff could achieve. I had no grand vision other than the kind of good journalism I practiced during my four decades in the industry. My go-to cliche is: If you build it, they will come.

My vision was to produce rock-solid reporting, great investigative and accountability journalism, lively and compelling prose, thought-provoking commentary and deeply moving spiritual writing. I have to say that it has been a lot harder than I thought. Change is hard. And yet we have achieved more than I ever could have imagined. NCR smashed records at the Catholic Media Association conference in Phoenix this year with 70-plus awards for our news coverage.

Tops on that list of winners is Carol Zimmermann, my top and trusted deputy and veteran journalist who joined NCR as news editor in August 2024 after more than three decades in Catholic media. Carol was named winner of the 2025 St. Francis de Sales Award, the top CMA award. Upon winning the prize, Zimmermann told the annual conference of the group that the Catholic beat offered an opportunity to see the breadth of life itself. It was a good mission statement for NCR. "On any given day you can be talking to someone who clung to their rosary in a bathtub during a tornado, a chaplain on death row, a senator speaking out for immigrants, or a cloistered sister making Communion wafers," Carol said. "I've done all those — though not in the same day."

Perusing the rest of the awards list, it is rewarding to see how stories that began as kernels of ideas turned into winners. NCR reporters Camillo Barone and Katie Collins Scott captured 10 awards each, a tribute to their smarts and beautiful writing. Seven awards each went to environment correspondent Brian Roewe, former senior correspondent Heidi Schlumpf, and Global Sisters Report journalists Doreen Ajiambo and Rhina Guidos. One entry won two awards for coverage of state-level anti-abortion initiatives. That package was an example of a more open and collaborative newsroom and a news industrystyle practice developed in recent months. The election story was first suggested by our sharp-eyed copy editor Renée K. Gadoua, and was reported by Schlumpf in collaboration with longtime nonprofit news site Mother Jones and reporter Russ Choma, who provided the campaign finance analysis that told our readers how much bishops were spending on the initiative elections.

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Plus there were unsung heroes who won prizes too, such as our longtime Scripture columnist, Sr. Mary McGlone, and Toni-Ann Ortiz, whose work on this print edition has delivered top-shelf work month-in and month out for years. In 2025, our year has gone gangbusters, dominated by President Donald Trump's cuts to aid and

pursuit of immigrants. Our biggest story in a decade has been the death of Pope Francis and the election of Pope Leo XIV. From my first day, I had been preparing for a papal transition and we were ready with a news story, an obituary, a live blog, coverage of the interregnum and unparalleled coverage of the conclave. Marshaling every ounce of our resources, NCR produced the only neutral and unbiased interactive database of every voting elector in the College of Cardinals — with details on their positions on seven key issues, from women in leadership to synodality to blessing of people in gay unions to the Latin Mass.

We produced a list of papal candidates — papabile in Italian — that was prescient. Led by departing Vatican correspondent Christopher White, the list was informed by reporting from Michael Sean Winters and Barone in Rome. We won national attention for our wall-to-wall coverage and for being one of the few organizations to put Cardinal Robert Prevost on our list. Our coverage also resulted in an influx of additional candidates to cover the Vatican. Chris had announced his decision to go to Georgetown University before Pope Francis died, and when our website won worldwide attention — plus record online readers — and Pope Leo XIV was elected, our inbox of applicants filled up.

Among them was the Vatican correspondent for Catholic News Service, Justin McClellan, an award-winning Rome correspondent from Delaware and graduate of the University of Notre Dame. He is smart and creative, generating fresh story ideas, and has delivered solid and innovative enterprise reporting. With Justin in his new role and with awards to propel us forward, you can expect NCR will continue to change, grow and improve.