Opinion
NCR Voices



Oklahoma City Archbishop Paul Coakley speaks during a Nov. 13, 2024, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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In the course of the summer, the U.S. bishops gather at different events, going on regional retreats, attending the Knights of Columbus convention, or celebrations of ordination anniversaries. This past summer, I have learned, there was some campaigning going on to make sure that Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City would be elected president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at their November plenary meeting.

It is understandable why some bishops would support Coakley. He is approachable and attractive, a fine speaker, and he knows how to run a meeting. Still, electing him president is a terrible idea.

First, Coakley was one of the 40 or so prelates who issued statements supporting then-Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, when Viganò issued his "testimony" accusing Pope Francis of covering up the crimes of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and, worse, calling on the pope to resign. The document made no sense on its face: Francis was elected in 2013, six full years after McCarrick had retired. It was St. Pope John Paul II who promoted McCarrick four times, not Francis.

"While I lack any personal knowledge or experience of the details contained in his 'testimony,' I have the deepest respect for Archbishop Viganò and his personal integrity," Coakley said in a statement, still posted on the archdiocesan website. He had not a single word of praise for the pope, to whom he had taken a vow of obedience.

Viganò has been excommunicated for schism and his postings online are increasingly unhinged. The McCarrick Report found that Viganò himself failed to investigate allegations of misconduct by McCarrick. The whole episode of Viganò releasing his "testimony" was a reckless, mendacious attempt at a putsch. Yet, Coakley has never retracted his statement.

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This is not merely an issue of integrity. There is a practical consequence. In Rome, issuing statements of support for Viganò was *brutta figura*, bad form, and they have long memories in Rome. One of the things officers of the bishops' conference do is travel to the Vatican twice a year (at least) to conduct the business of the conference. Why would the bishops select as their lead representative someone about whom many in the Vatican harbor suspicions?

Second, Coakley is the "Ecclesiastical Advisor" of the Napa Institute. Now, conservative Catholics have as much right to organize themselves as liberal Catholics do, but the Napa Institute, and its founder, Tim Busch, seem intent on cannibalizing Catholicism in the service of their libertarian creed. Busch's views of the church are also decidedly pre-Vatican II, offering his institute as a place where Catholics can "hunker down and survive" which is a far different image from that of the missionary evangelist or field hospital images used by Francis and, now, by Pope Leo XIV. Busch is an influencer and he likes to buy things, but the presidency of the conference should not be for sale.

The most important reason not to select Coakley, however, is because the conference is badly divided and needs someone who can help bring the bishops together. Coakley is too far to the right to be able to affect the unity the conference needs. I will feel the same way if one of the candidates for the conference presidency is Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington, D.C. McElroy is the outstanding intellect in the hierarchy and, at a time of rising authoritarianism, he would be the perfect spokesperson for the U.S. bishops. But he is too far to the left for the body of bishops and, just so, I don't think he could unite them.

The bishops' conference has not yet released the names of those nominated for the presidency, or for committee chairs, to be elected in November. But I hope the bishops will select a president who is smack dab in the center, someone who is as publicly committed to fighting abortion as he is to defending immigrants, someone who is conservative but who was always loyal to Francis, and someone committed to the synodal vision that Leo has endorsed. Cardinal Sean O'Malley is retired, so he can't take the job, but the conference needs someone like him if they are to come together.

The bishops' conference has become a shadow of its former self. In the 1980s and 1990s into the 21st century, the conference staff worked tirelessly to draft proposals that would unite the bishops, not divide them. The conference was influential on

Capitol Hill in part because it was so determinedly nonpartisan. Back then, neither Congress nor the president would have dared cut funding for migrant and refugee programs the conference administers. The Trump administration has done that, eliciting barely a whimper of protest from the bishops' conference leadership. They need to move in a new direction, and they need to move together. That will take new leadership.