Opinion
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Bishops vote during a Nov. 11, 2025, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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November 11, 2025

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The vote for a new president of the U.S. bishops' conference was close. Close and deeply disappointing. In the runoff, Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City narrowly defeated Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, by a vote of 128-109.

Coakley's victory reflects the fact that the affable Coakley is well-liked by his peers. It also indicates that the majority of bishops want continuity at the conference, preferring a stance of accommodation with the Trump administration. Anyone who would like to see the bishops adopt a proper distance from the partisan politics of the day cannot look to the presidency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for help.

In choosing Coakley, the bishops had to overlook the disrespect he demonstrated toward Pope Francis in 2018 when Coakley issued a statement of support for Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò after Viganò called on the pope to resign and made false allegations that Francis had covered up the crimes of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. It is one thing to disagree with a pope. It is quite another to be disrespectful, lending credence to an obviously false set of accusations. It is shocking that Coakley has never taken that statement of support down even after Viganò was declared excommunicate.

The choice also means that the pernicious influence of Timothy Busch and his Napa Institute will become more dominant in the workings of the bishops' conference. Coakley is the institute's "ecclesiastical advisor." At a time when income inequality is worse than ever, we can't expect the conference to confront the distortion of Catholic social teaching that is the Napa Institute's special area of expertise. Busch fawns over Donald Trump, and one wonders if the new bishops' conference president will get a small office in the West Wing. The message the U.S. bishops sent to the Holy Father just before the election of Coakley strongly advocated for the immigrants but their vote undercut that commitment.

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What most U.S. bishops fail to see, or see and don't care, is the degree to which their opposition to Francis was unique in the universal church. Most bishops and cardinals in Rome and throughout the world found the Viganò episode, and responses like that of Coakley, alarming and distressing. In Catholic ecclesiology, the pope is the focal point of unity.

Conservative Catholics in the U.S. were hoping that the cardinals thought as they did and that the conclave would result in a course correction from what they perceived as Francis' unruly reform efforts. But the cardinals opted for continuity in May, just as the U.S. bishops opted for continuity at the conference today. That means there will be continued tensions in the relationship between the U.S. hierarchy and the Holy See, and the opposition to Francis is likely to become resistance to Leo. It may be subtle, but it will be obvious.

Had the bishops chosen Flores, they would have signaled a desire for a different direction and for better unity within the conference. Flores is trusted by both the conservatives and the moderates among the bishops and, consequently, he could have begun uniting the deeply divided conference. He would have slowly moved the conference to better align itself with the priorities articulated by Leo. Flores is now the vice president, and in three years he could ascend to the top slot. One bishop said to me after the vote, "Three years go by quickly." These three years, however, constitute most of Trump's second term. And it is unlikely the U.S. bishops' conference will take the lead in challenging anything that comes from this White House.

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A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 5-18, 2025** print issue under the headline: The depressing result of the US bishops’ conference presidential election.