Opinion
Editorial



Bishops from around the country gather at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore Nov. 10, 2025, for the opening Mass of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' fall plenary assembly. (OSV News/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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At meeting's end in Baltimore, the nation's bishops could go home satisfied that they were able to unify behind a brief statement that, in the final paragraph, said: "We oppose the indiscriminate mass deportation of people."

That line, the one that media of all sorts picked up as clearly signaling an opposition to Trump administration policy, was actually an amendment advanced by Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich.

The document, labeled a "Special Message" on immigration, was passed overwhelmingly by what has been a deeply divided conference on other matters. The final vote was 216-5 with three abstentions.

The bishops heartily congratulated themselves with enthusiastic applause when the vote was announced. Newly elected president of the conference, Oklahoma City Archbishop Paul Coakley, said the statement had a "nice balance" and expressed special appreciation for the document's several mentions of the need for immigration reform.

While we appreciate the desire for unity after so many years of public dissension, it is that word "balance" which gives us pause.



Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City, smiles moments after being elected president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops during a Nov. 11, 2025, session of the fall general assembly of the USCCB in Baltimore. His three-year term begins at the close of the Nov. 11-13 plenary. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

The bishops' statement was, for practical purposes, "balanced" in the extreme — a deferential plea to political power that has amply demonstrated it is as untrustworthy as was President Trump's promise not to touch the East Wing.

The long opening paragraph announces that the gathered prelates were "disturbed," "saddened," "concerned," "troubled" and "grieved." They were also, in one spot, filled with lament. Worthy emotions, each one, and yet they fall far short when you look at the streets of major American cities, when you view videos filling your screens day after day. People are profiled and vilified,  arbitrarily lose legal status, and are deprived of sacraments in detention. They are fearful they'll be detained while taking kids to school, or inconsolable over losing family members through immigration raids.

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The 618-word statement may be benign, but it is — at least — a beginning. Our fear is that it will be treated as an end in and of itself. That it will be placed on a shelf to gather dust, except when one bishop or another desperately points to it as proof that they have, indeed, done something.

But what have they done? After that opening list of emotions, the statement moves rapidly into seeking a balance which drains the energy out of the intent:

> We pray for an end to dehumanizing rhetoric and violence, whether directed at immigrants or at law enforcement. We pray that the Lord may guide the leaders of our nation, and we are grateful for past and present opportunities to dialogue with public and elected officials. In this dialogue, we will continue to advocate for meaningful immigration reform.

We wondered on this page, just prior to the meeting, whether the bishops would find the courage to pronounce an unequivocal condemnation of the assault on immigrants that is roiling Catholic communities across the country, indiscriminately rounding up people without warrant or due process in order to fulfill arbitrary deportation goals and separating families long established in this country.

What they chose to say, or not say, we wrote, could define what it means to be Catholic in the United States in this moment of political crisis.

The statement they finally came up with wasn't strong. It was the most they could agree on, given the deep divisions among them. It took most of the 618 words to get to the one straight statement of opposition to current policy.

The statement doesn't mention ICE, nor its masked and heavily armed unidentified thugs who are invading communities in ways violative not only of the basic tenets of civil, democratic society, but also of essential human dignity.

If the bishops think that one declarative statement of opposition places the Trump administration on notice of Catholic intent, or purpose, or plans to oppose and resist, they are being willfully naive. And yet, again, if this serves as a beginning, then all well and good. But what comes next? That's the test.

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Will there be an instruction to call legislators and demand a stop to the human rights violations in our midst? What about resources that would fund an education effort held at the parish level throughout the country? Followed by appearances on EWTN and other outlets calling for an end to the barbaric treatment of our brothers and sisters, many of them Catholic? When do they develop instruction to pastors in dioceses on how to raise this issue and call their people to action?

Perhaps if things get bad enough the sad and concerned and grieving and lamenting bishops will turn to what the moment requires: condemnation of increasingly authoritarian and racist tactics in the service of Christian nationalism and simple political arrogance.

In the meantime, the bishops can look to those corners of their dioceses where people on the ground are doing more than celebrating balance while wishing for dialogue and meaningful immigration reform. These Catholics are acting out the heart of the Gospel — and the well-developed Catholic social justice tradition.

They're on the front lines, they are the leaders, and they were there long before this "balanced" attempt at episcopal guidance.

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2025** and **Immigration and the Church** feature series.
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