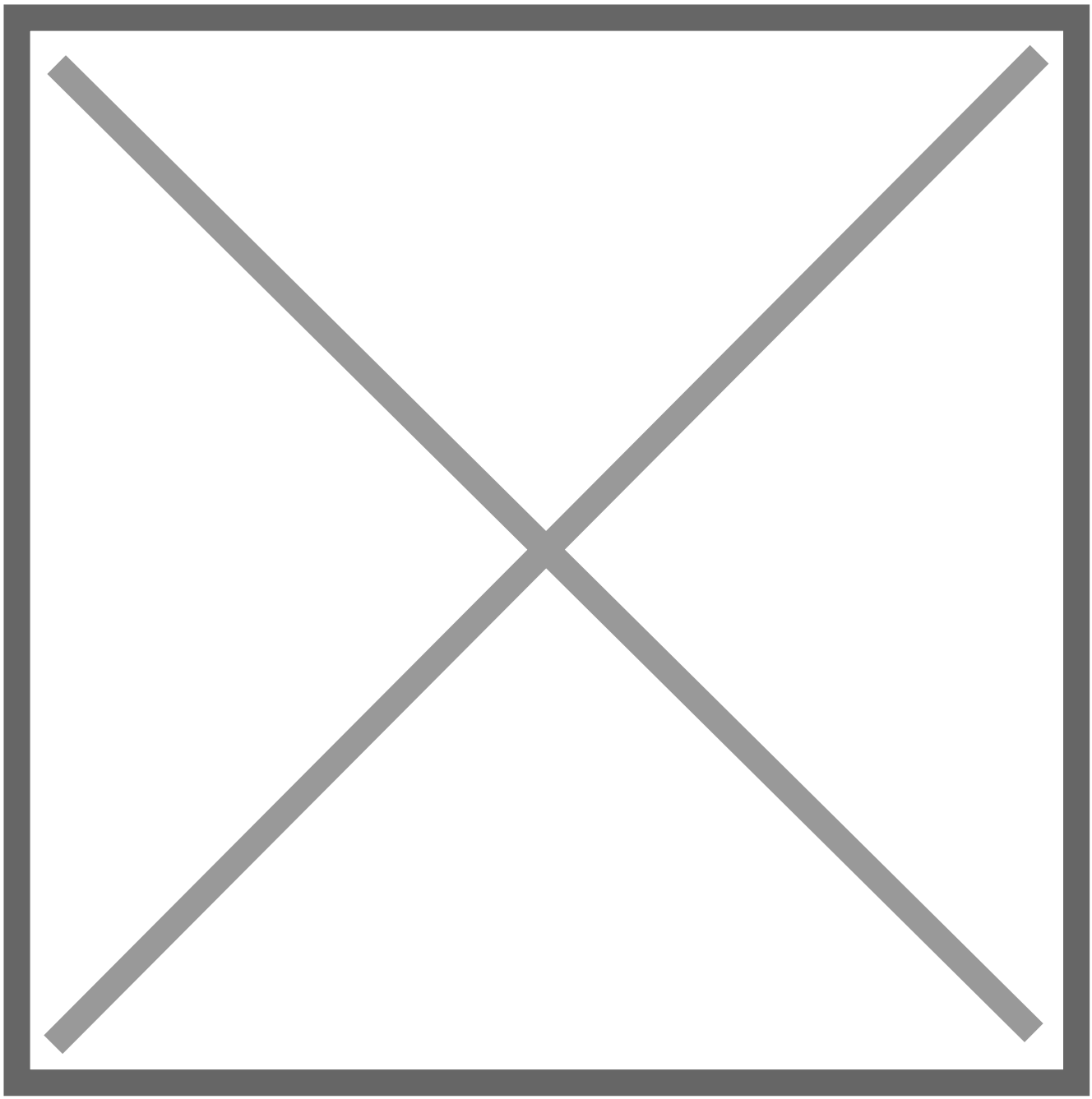
News



Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, N.J., elevates a chalice during a Nov. 5, 2025, Mass at the Archabbey Church of Our Lady of Einsiedeln in St. Meinrad, Ind. The liturgy took place during a conference titled "Deepening Communion in a Polarized World" co-sponsored by St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology and the Glenmary Home Missioners religious order. (OSV News/The Criterion/Sean Gallagher)

Sean Gallagher

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As he reflected on the polarization in the United States and even the Catholic Church, Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, recalled a story that provides a possible path to understanding and communion.

He noted how in the 1980s, U.S. President Ronald Reagan, a Republican, and U.S. House Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, a Democrat, could "sit down, maybe over a couple of adult beverages after hours and ask each other, 'What can we do together for the country?'"

"I don't believe those conversations would happen any longer," said Tobin, former archbishop of Indianapolis. "And they have an effect on the way we live in the body of Christ."

Tobin shared that story as he took part in a Nov. 4-6 conference on "Deepening Communion in a Polarized World," hosted by St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology in St. Meinrad and co-sponsored by the seminary and the Glenmary Home Missioners religious order.

Bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, religious and lay Catholics from across the country participated in the three-day event, including Seattle Archbishop Paul Etienne.

In his service in leadership of the Redemptorist order, Tobin said he saw divisions in the church in Chile and Eastern Europe that were rooted in broader societal and political trends.

He noted in a Nov. 5 conference session that he's also experienced such divisions within the church while serving as a bishop in the U.S., both among his brother bishops and in the faithful as a whole.

Overcoming divisions requires a nuanced approach, Tobin advised.

"My experience tells me that polarization is not an issue that you can come at head on," he said. "You have to come at it at a 45-degree angle, because if we come at head on, conversation is entirely defensive."

Tobin suggested taking an approach promoted by the late Pope Francis over the last several years of his leadership of the church: synodality.

It's a method of conversation marked by prayerful listening, times of silent reflection and an openness to be led by the Holy Spirit. Synodality also emphasizes all Catholics embracing their co-responsibility for the church's mission of proclaiming the Gospel.

"It's not a goal," Tobin said. "It's a technique. It's a relationship. I think it has many different wonderful theological roots.

"We often remain on an ethical level. We have to go to the anthropological and theological level if we really want to develop models of relationships that are centered on the image of the Trinity — one God, three persons, three person who are constantly communicating."

Communication in the church that would deepen communion among the faithful requires "the obligation to listen," Tobin said.

"We need to train ourselves to listen, to listen to others without putting them in boxes," he said. "Has it ever occurred to you that some of the questions we ask determine where that person is? 'What books do you read?' 'What newspapers do

you read?' 'What websites do you visit?'"

Such an approach to quickly judging a person, Tobin went on, is "actually a reversal of the resurrection of Lazarus."

"We're creating a tomb … and shoving a living human being into it and rolling a stone in front of it," he said. "Jesus calls people out of their tombs. And we can do that too — if we listen."

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In his concluding remarks, Tobin described three "opponents of polarization":

— Self-criticism, which he described as "the price of admission of anyone who wants to deal seriously" with the problem of polarization.

— The ability to identify where people of faith can have "legitimate differences."

"Healthy pluralism is also an enemy of polarization," Tobin said. "Differentiate, as much as you can, opinion from fact."

— The role of the papacy in the church to foster unity among the faithful.

"For Catholics, Peter is the focus and font of ecclesial communion," Tobin noted. "There can be no overcoming polarization for us, and achieving consensus, that leaves one at odds with the magisterium."

Etienne invited his listeners to think about Christ on the cross.

For him, this is an image of "the Lord embracing humanity in an effort to bring them closer to his heart, in an effort to bring things to the center, to himself."

To build real communion in the church, Etienne said, "we must draw everyone's attention to Christ, who is our source of unity and communion. To be associated with Christ leads to mission — his mission. By baptism, we receive not only a share in the life of the risen Jesus, but also a share in the responsibility for his mission.

"God, through his Son, chose to enter into the human family by means of the incarnation. This must be a part of our posture: a willingness to draw near to one another."

Like Tobin, Etienne participated in the two meetings in 2023 and 2024 of the Synod of Bishops on synodality. For him, synodality is a key means to overcome polarization and foster communion.

Etienne said his experience at the synod meetings helped him to value greatly "the beauty of the synodal process of dialogue and listening."

"It allows people with divergent opinions to first discover the other as another human being, to build a relationship," he said. "It is difficult to speak disrespectfully of one with whom you have a relationship."

Etienne's experience of the synod meetings also convinced him of "the need for the world basically to go on retreat," a remark which drew laughter from the conference participants.

"We need to renew our relationship with God, with Jesus, and to familiarize ourselves even more and be open more to the properties of the Holy Spirit."

Renewing relationships with God can help people be open to better relationships with other people, Etienne suggested.

He said that, for there to be hope for the faithful to resolve differences, they first need to build up relationships among each other for the benefit of "our church and our culture."

That can be difficult, however, when some groups of the faithful have been hurt at the hands of other groups. He's met with representatives of such hurt groups — victims of clergy sexual abuse, Native Americans and Black Catholics — in leading the Archdiocese of Seattle.

Allowing such conversations as a means of healing, Etienne said, "requires patience, compassion and a great deal of love and understanding."

At the same time, he recognized from his own experience that there is "a personal toll" for Catholics who try to foster such conversations.

"Self-care is important, because truly listening takes real energy and time," Etienne said.

"We as a human family must learn to coexist in order to thrive," he added. "Let's embrace our present reality while cultivating hope and optimism and always being mindful of Christ, who is our common denominator.

"We learn from him how to be attentive to the other, how to be merciful and compassionate. In short, we learn how to build the kingdom of God."