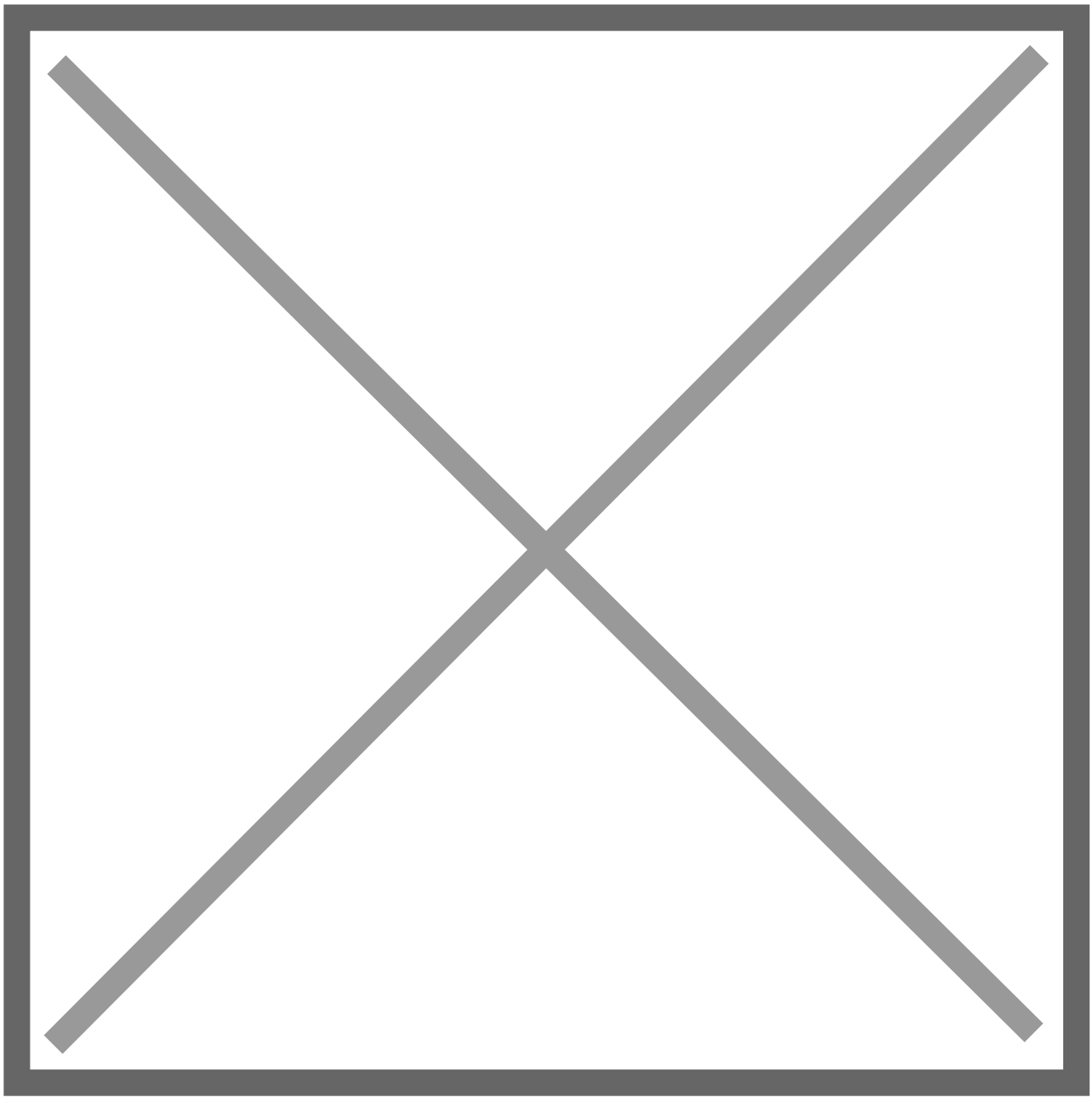
News



Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., are pictured in a combination photo. Marking Martin Luther King Jr. Day Jan. 19, Coakley urged Catholics to reflect on how they are called to be "drum majors for justice" in their own communities, drawing on the Civil Rights leader's words and the Church's Gospel mission in a Jan. 13, 2026, statement released by the USCCB. (OSV News/LBJ Library/Bob Roller)



by OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — January 19, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Marking the Jan. 19 Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, urged Catholics to reflect on how they are called to be "drum majors for justice" in their own communities. He drew on the slain Civil Rights leader's words and the Church's Gospel mission from Jesus Christ in a Jan. 13 statement released by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Coakley reflected on the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1968 sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct," and challenged the faithful to consider how leadership rooted in service and humility can shape efforts for justice, peace and righteousness today.

"Let us take a moment to honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose prophetic voice was a 'drum major for justice,'" Coakley said, referring to Rev. King by a widely-used title reflecting his doctorate in systematic theology earned from Boston University. King also received several honorary doctorates from colleges and universities that held his Civil Rights leadership in high esteem until his death at just 39 years old. He had led the Civil Rights movement from 1955 until 1968, when a white supremacist assassinated him in Memphis, Tennessee.

In reflecting on how King's "inspiring words continue to speak to our hearts today," Coakley quoted the Civil Rights leader's own description of the legacy he hoped to leave behind.

"Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice," King said in the sermon. "Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a

drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter."

Coakley emphasized that Rev. King's message remains relevant for Catholics seeking to live out the Gospel in concrete ways.

"Dr. King's sermon encouraged people to be leaders in the priorities that Christ gave us," he said.

He posed a central question for the faithful: "What does it mean to be 'a drum major' in our own communities?"

Advertisement

Answering that question, the archbishop pointed to Jesus Christ's demands in the Gospel of Matthew, writing that the priorities Christ gave his followers are directed in the corporal works of mercy: "to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison."

Coakley said the Catholic Church also seeks to fulfill this mandate through ministries and charitable works across the country. But he emphasized that the call extends to every follower of Christ.

"Just as important is the challenge to help the faithful to authentically live out this call," he said.

He cited recent efforts by the U.S. bishops as examples of striving to lead with love, noting the Nov. 2025 special message on immigration and its continued commitment to "addressing the sin of racism."

He said both efforts are "two recent examples that serve as efforts to be drum majors of love in our communities."

Referencing the bishops' Nov. 2018 pastoral letter on racism, "Open Wide Our Hearts," he highlighted the enduring influence of King's leadership in confronting racial injustice and fostering unity grounded in faith.

"As we remember Dr. King and commemorate his legacy, let us continue this work as drum majors and engage in actions of compassion and mercy," the USCCB president said.

Coakley concluded by inviting Catholics to prayerful discernment and action.

"I encourage you to take time to reflect on how the Holy Spirit may be inviting you to join with others in addressing challenges within our families, neighborhoods, or communities," he said. "May we lead the way in building a society rooted in justice, peace, righteousness, and the dignity of every human person."

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is observed on the third Monday of the month of January, near his Jan. 15 birthday. This year also marks the 40th anniversary of its first observance as a national holiday beginning Jan. 20, 1986.