News



Archbishop Ronald Hicks looks on as priests enter the sanctuary to receive Communion during his installation Mass as the new archbishop of New York at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City Feb. 6, 2026. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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When Archbishop Ronald Hicks formally took possession of the New York Archdiocese Feb. 6, he stepped into an institution still defined by financial hardships that began long before his arrival.

Decades after the eruption of the nation's clergy sexual abuse scandal, the country's most prominent Catholic archdiocese remains locked in an effort to compensate victims while sustaining a pastoral system strained by rising costs, shrinking trust and internal clergy polarization.

Over the past decade, the New York Archdiocese has sold assets, merged parishes, reduced budgets with layoffs, and restructured health care and retirement systems in order to absorb the financial shock of abuse litigation. In December, it announced a proposed $300 million compensation fund for survivors — one of the largest such efforts in the country.

But interviews with local priests and experts suggest that behind the public gestures toward accountability lies a quieter crisis that Hicks just inherited: uncertainty about long-term solvency, uneven communication with clergy, and increasing ideological polarization.

Internal consequences of strained finances

Even if a settlement with sexual abuse survivors succeeds, its institutional consequences are already visible. Over the past 15-20 years, more than 100 parishes in New York have been closed or merged. Schools, health care ministries and archdiocesan offices have been consolidated or eliminated. Staff positions have been cut. Budgets have been reduced.

Kevin Ahern, professor and chair of theology at Manhattan University in the Bronx, said the cumulative effect of these measures has reshaped Catholic life in the city.

"Even if the archdiocese does not declare bankruptcy, the abuse crisis has taken a toll," Ahern said. "Both in terms of the trust that people put into the church and also in terms of finances that many properties have to have been sold to cover some of the expenses; ministries have to be downsized."



A man protests outside St. Patrick's Cathedral ahead of an evening prayer service Feb. 5, 2026, on the eve of the formal installation of Archbishop Ronald Hicks as archbishop of New York, succeeding Cardinal Timothy Dolan. (OSV News/Reuters/Eduardo Munoz)

Ahern noted that the impact has not been evenly distributed. "Unfortunately, some of the ones that have been affected are ones that serve minority or underrepresented groups," he said, pointing in particular to the recent closure of the archdiocesan Office of Black Ministry and schools serving low-income and first-generation families.

At the parish level, the financial pressure has filtered down into daily pastoral life. In interviews with the National Catholic Reporter, archdiocesan priests described a system increasingly oriented toward austerity, cost control and risk management.

Two archdiocesan priests familiar with internal discussions said some parishes with cash reserves have been asked to contribute millions of dollars to central needs, reinforcing a sense that the archdiocese is operating in emergency mode.

The restructuring has also affected clergy health care and retirement, areas that priests say were historically stable and are now in flux. This year, the archdiocese moved priests to a new health care model, a shift priests said was driven primarily by cost.

"It was done for financial reasons," said Fr. Kevin Madigan, pastor of St. Thomas More and Our Lady of Good Counsel. Madigan turns 80 this summer after serving under four archbishops during more than 50 years of priesthood. "Now maybe the other [health care plan] was extraordinarily expensive, too expensive and they should have moved to a cheaper carrier, but they did it, I'm sure, motivated by the finances."

"There's absolutely no consultation. There's no consultation," said one archdiocesan priest, who did not want to be quoted with his name to discuss official archdiocesan matters. Under the new plan, copays for routine visits rose sharply. "We were paying $25 copay. In some cases we have seen the cost of a copay triple."

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The cumulative effect, the priests said, is a growing sense that decisions are being made according to a strictly practical logic.

"If you're looking at this from a completely utilitarian perspective — 'Well, you're our workforce and we need to keep you well' — you're not doing a very good job at that because you're not keeping us in healthy situations," one priest said.

That anxiety is compounded by what they described as persistent rumors of insolvency, paired with a refusal to speak openly about the archdiocese's true financial position.

"We do know that they're desperate for money," one priest said, pointing to requests for large contributions from solvent parishes. Yet the larger picture remains opaque, he said.

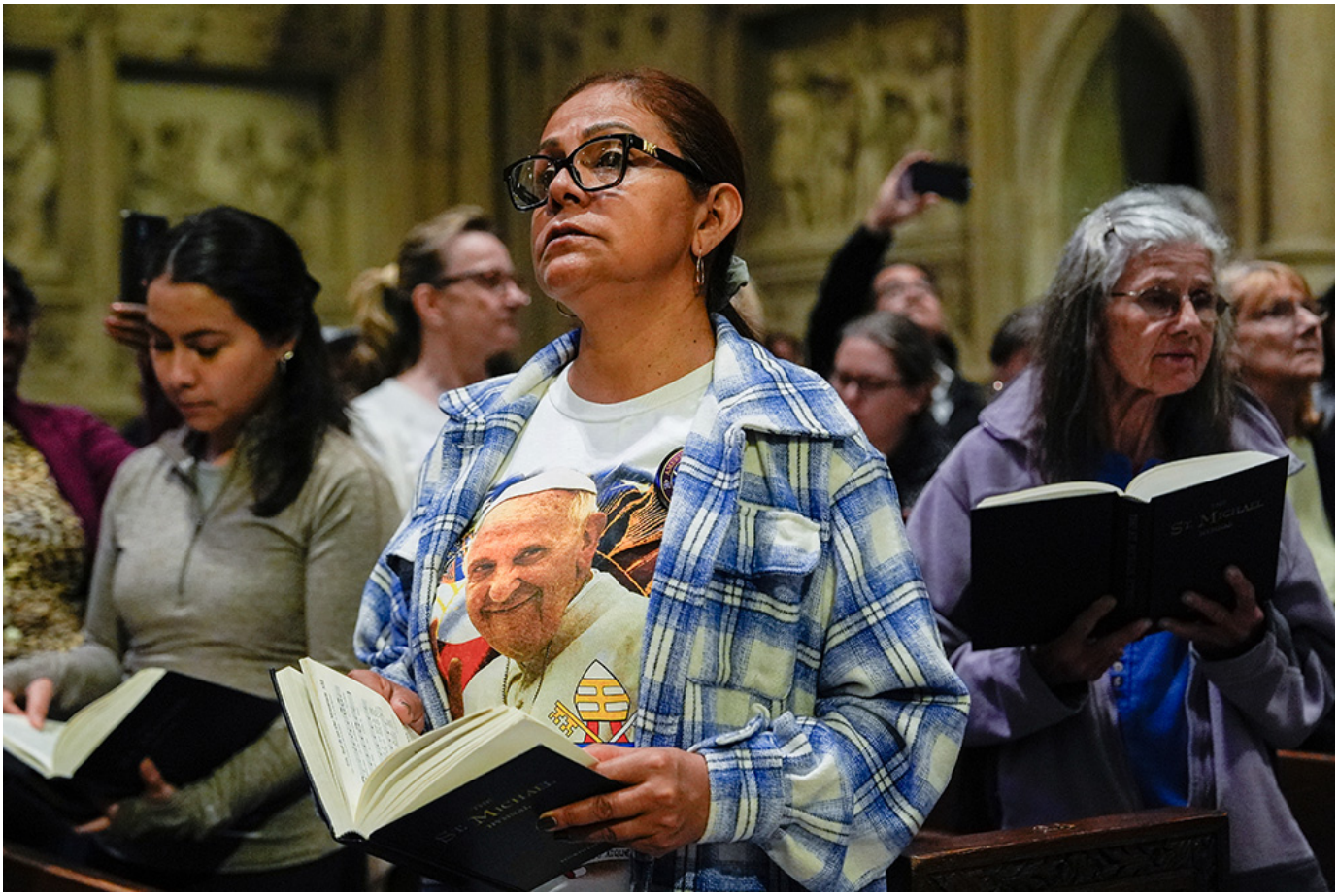
"There's always a sense of something doom impending."

In the absence of clarity, many priests have chosen silence over confrontation. "A lot of guys in our age group are just trying to keep their heads down and get through and look at whatever their retirement is going to be," one said. "They don't want to make waves."

For the archdiocese's new leadership, the priests suggested, the challenge will also be addressing an erosion of confidence that has taken root quietly — and deeply — inside the clergy itself.

Polarization, formation and a fractured presbyterate

If the New York Archdiocese's financial crisis has unfolded largely behind closed doors, its clerical divisions are increasingly visible at the parish level — expressed through liturgy, formation, and sharply diverging visions of priestly identity. Interviews with clergy across generations and cultural backgrounds pointed to a presbyterate that no longer shares a common grammar for authority, collaboration or mission.



Parishioners pray during a Mass for Pope Francis at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, on April 22, 2025, the day after Francis' death. (AP/Julia Demaree Nikhinson)

The polarization, they said, intensified during the pontificate of Pope Francis. "We saw a lot of it during Francis's tenure," one priest said, describing what he characterized as a period of "acting out" among some clergy. "I think they were just waiting him out, till when we got somebody who could restore back the Benedict XVI era."

The division is aesthetic, cultural and personal. Another priest described a growing emphasis on traditional clerical dress and ritual among younger priests as compensatory rather than theological. "I think there's so many priests that have not come to terms with their own sexuality," he said. "I think you look at these young priests and they're all dressed up in all kinds of cassocks and robes and hats. It's almost like an escapism."

Those tensions surface most sharply in parish life, particularly around the liturgy. One priest recalled a conversation with an educated parishioner who had quietly left her parish. "She said, 'I'm so tired of all this Latin,' " he recounted. Watching that parish livestream later, he noticed the priest celebrating *ad orientem*, or facing the altar, during the consecration, as if it were a pre-Second Vatican Council Mass.

"Now, who's asking for that?" the priest said.

For Madigan, the divide feels generational and relational. "I think there's a kind of a gap between the older clergy and the younger clergy," he said. "I've gone to some retreats and they ignore me. It just seems that they're just waiting for us to die to take over the parishes," he said, chuckling.



The façade of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Manhattan, N.Y. (Wikimedia Commons/Deansfa)

Madigan described a worldview among some younger clergy that is highly rigid, contributing to what he sees as a widening cultural distance inside the presbyterate.

"In their worldview, too, I just think that they have a very black and white attitude towards things and maybe it's just being younger. I didn't have that myself, but it just seems that there's a more closed-minded viewpoint among younger clergy than among older clergy."

From an analytical perspective, Ahern of Manhattan University cautioned against reducing the divide to a simple conservative/liberal binary. "Those are two, I think, oversimplistic analyses," he said. Instead, Ahern pointed to overlapping fault lines — generational, cultural, geographic and ecclesial.

"There are many stories of parishes in the archdiocese where an older priest had a vibrant community," Ahern said. "That priest retires, a new, younger priest comes in and is more traditional and there are a lot of wounds in this generational shift."

Those wounds are not confined to clergy. "Archbishop Hicks will have to not only be trying to bridge the understanding of the different priests," Ahern said, "but to figure out how to talk to laypeople who also feel wounded or feel unheard."

Among immigrant parishes, the polarization takes different forms. Fr. Gilberto Angel, pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes in West Harlem, said tensions over liturgy are less pronounced in Hispanic communities — but not absent from the wider archdiocese. "My only concern," he said, "is priests who are trying to impose on people their own ideas of how to celebrate Mass."

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>
> —Kevin Ahern
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Angel also pointed to a structural failure in vocation formation. With only eight seminarians entering this year in all of New York, he said language and cultural barriers are actively discouraging potential candidates. "I know of some vocations in my parish, but they can't," he said, because the seminary formation remains almost entirely English-only.

For Fr. Joseph Kinda, an African priest serving a West African community in Harlem, polarization intersects with resentment and mistrust. Sent from Burkina Faso to New York in response to the archdiocese's priest shortage and to minister to African immigrants in Harlem, he described an experience marked by suspicion rather than solidarity.

"Some don't consider us [African priests] as being brothers of them," he said. "They only see us as beggars coming for need of money. And for me, it's sad."



Fr. Joseph Kinda is an African priest ministering to a West African community at St. Joseph of the Holy Family Church in Harlem, New York, Feb. 11, 2026. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Kinda framed the tension within a longer historical arc. "We were evangelized by the Western world," he said. "Europe, America came to Africa and evangelized us." Given that history, he said, the reluctance of Western dioceses to receive African clergy as equals is difficult to reconcile.

"If they accept that their ancestors went to Africa for the call of Christ," he said, "they should also accept today that Africa comes back and gives them back in recognition."

New Hicks era raises hopes amid challenges

Just less than a week after his Feb. 6 installation Mass, Hicks' first pastoral visit carried strong symbolic weight. By beginning at Our Lady Queen of Angels School in Harlem, a historic Catholic institution serving immigrant families since 1892, Hicks signaled that education, poverty and neighborhood presence would be central to his ministry.

His time with the Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal, whose work combines eucharistic devotion with service to the homeless, reinforced that message. The visit also linked his leadership to the legacy of Francis, who visited the school in 2015.

For many pastors across New York, the question of evangelization is inseparable from immigration, fear and visibility — who feels seen by the church and who does not. Nowhere is that clearer than the parish where Angel ministers. Our Lady of Lourdes is, by his estimate, 95% Hispanic.

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The parish's six weekend Masses reflect that reality: five in Spanish, one in English. Most parishioners are Dominican, with a rapidly growing Ecuadorian population, along with smaller numbers of Mexicans, Colombians, Salvadorans and Argentinians. Many are families with children; some have been directly affected by recent deportations conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents.

Against this backdrop, the arrival of Hicks has generated a strong emotional response. When Hicks spoke Spanish publicly — beginning with Spanish at his installation Mass — Angel said parishioners immediately noticed. But language alone was not the decisive factor.

"There's a big difference," Angel said, between speaking Spanish and knowing the culture. Hicks' years ministering in El Salvador from 2005 to 2010, he said, signaled something deeper: lived experience of Latin American faith, hardship and resilience.

For immigrant Catholics accustomed to feeling peripheral, that mattered. "They felt seen," Angel said.

That sense of recognition has translated into hope that the archdiocese will become more outspoken in defense of immigrants. Angel contrasted Hicks' early gestures with what he described as a long period of relative silence from church leadership on immigration abuses.

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"I hope he can be a prophetic voice for immigrants, for the abuse that has been happening," Angel said. "We need someone, especially if you're the archbishop of New York, to speak out for those who are suffering, because I don't think that they feel that somebody's defending them."

Angel recounted a story shared by a parishioner who attended Hicks' installation reception. When she shook the archbishop's hand, she pleaded with him in Spanish not to forget about immigrants. Hicks embraced her, she later told Angel, and said they were his priority. For Angel, that reaction underscored how symbolic gestures can carry real pastoral weight.

Madigan pointed to Hicks' work with the poor and his missionary background as signs of a leader shaped more by reconciliation than bureaucracy. He said that while the archdiocese has offices and Catholic Charities programs devoted to immigrants, the moment demands something more sustained and public. With ICE activity even in his wealthy Upper East Side, some parishioners are afraid to attend Mass.

"It has to be said over and over again," he said, "because we see how the immigrants are treated poorly over and over again."



A eucharistic adoration is held at St. Joseph of the Holy Family Church in Harlem, New York, Feb.11, 2026. The parish is mainly attended by West African immigrants. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Ahern said his optimism has grown in recent weeks as Hicks began to define his pastoral priorities. He pointed to what he described as a distinctly Francis sensibility, reflected in Hicks' repeated emphasis on "*todos, todos, todos*" — everyone included — both in public remarks and liturgies. Hicks' ease in moving between Spanish and English, he added, signals a deliberate effort to bridge communities that often remain separated within the archdiocese.

Ahern identified evangelization as a fundamental challenge for the new archbishop — and one where Hicks has already signaled urgency. His hope, Ahern said, is for a renewed commitment to the kind of holistic evangelization that Francis outlined in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and championed: an approach that integrates proclamation of the Gospel with service to the poor, attention to the full human person and an integral spirituality.

At St. Paul the Apostle Church in Midtown Manhattan, long known for its inclusive and welcoming reputation, Paulist Fr. Eric Andrews framed the challenge more broadly. Reuniting a polarized archdiocese, he said, will require patience and listening before policy. Andrews expressed hope that Hicks, arriving without the baggage of local ecclesial battles, might see connections others have missed.

"A new missionary comes in with fresh eyes," Andrews said. "He has the opportunity to see things in a totally fresh way, without all the other preconditions or all the other old stories. So I hope he sees us in a way that can really help us come together and to see the treasure amongst ourselves that we may not understand or recognize at this point."