News



Pope Leo XIV arrives for his weekly general audience in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican, April 1, 2026. (RNS/AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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After President Donald Trump attacked Pope Leo XIV and his foreign policy on social media this week, U.S. Catholics, and especially bishops, have largely reacted with condemnation and dismay.

While it’s not new for U.S. presidents and the popes to disagree — especially on matters concerning war — what’s surprising about the recent spat between Leo and Trump is how much it has unified the Catholic bishops and faithful behind the pontiff, after years marked by division and internal conflict.

"The attack on Pope Leo has united the American hierarchy with particular zeal," said Christopher White, author of the 2025 book *Pope Leo XIV: Inside the Conclave and the Dawn of a New Papacy*.

The bishops’ unity has been strengthened by the election of an American pope and the "general sense of obligation that they need to support him and have his back," he said.

From the moment Leo walked out on the loggia after his election last May, he laid out his mission, entrusted to him by the cardinals who elected him, to "walk together with you as a church, united, ever pursuing peace and justice." His motto In Illo uno unum ("In the one Christ we are one") is a manifesto of what the new pope wants to

prioritize in what he considers a fractured church and society.

During Pope Francis' papacy, U.S. bishops only occasionally criticized him in public, but their United States Conference of Catholic Bishops organizing body rarely threw its weight behind his priorities, like the environment and dialogue, known as synodality. And their attempts to weigh in on former President Joe Biden's policies were marred by division as disagreements about denying Democrats who supported abortion rights Communion spilled into public view.

However, under Leo, the bishops have gradually ramped up a forceful and united defense of the pope's critiques of the Trump administration's policies.



President Donald Trump pretends to aim a sniper gun while speaking with reporters in the James Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House, April 6, 2026, in Washington. (RNS/AP/Julia Demaree Nikhinson)

Though conference leadership and many bishops initially avoided direct public confrontation with the administration, they united behind a November statement opposing indiscriminate mass deportation. But the process behind that statement revealed the bishops were not completely coordinated on a more confrontational stance. A last-minute, public amendment from Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, a close Leo ally, added its strongest oppositional language. And the statement, like most of the bishops' public interventions until then, did not name Trump directly.

Since November, Timothy Broglio, the archbishop for U.S. military services, whose presidency of the conference ended at their meeting the same month, has stated publicly that troops could not be forced to commit immoral acts, including regarding "the intentional killing of noncombatants" in the context of U.S. strikes on alleged drug traffickers and in the Iran war.

In recent weeks, the USCCB's new leadership has become pointed in calling on Trump to act for peace. Then this week, conference president Paul Coakley, Oklahoma City archbishop, speedily responded to Trump's Truth Social post criticizing Leo, writing: "I am disheartened that the President chose to write such disparaging words about the Holy Father. Pope Leo is not his rival; nor is the Pope a politician. He is the Vicar of Christ who speaks from the truth of the Gospel and for the care of souls."

Coakley was quickly backed by other bishops — a sign of conviction in an institution where lengthy discussions can slow public interaction.

The bishops have been nudged toward stronger, unified public responses by Leo himself — who said in October that the USCCB should be "stronger in their own voice," and that Broglio as president should speak on immigration — and members within their ranks.



President Donald Trump on April 12, 2026, left, and Pope Leo XIV on March 31, 2026. (RNS/AP)

San José, California, Bishop Oscar Cantú, a former conference committee chair, was one bishop calling for the group to become a prophetic "moral voice" and leave behind hesitancy to offend Trump supporters if necessary. "This has become a moment in which we cannot remain silent, lest we become complicit in the blasphemy of the sacred and the disrespect to human dignity," Cantú wrote. "The prophets were not popular, particularly with the powerful."

A day after Vice President JD Vance, who is Catholic, challenged Leo on his interpretation of just war theory at a Tuesday event, the conference also issued a statement on the issue. "How do you say that God is never on the side of those who wield the sword?" Vance asked.

The bishops’ doctrine chair, Brooklyn Auxiliary Bishop James Massa, issued a statement clarifying that a just war must be in defense and that "when Pope Leo XIV speaks as supreme pastor of the universal Church, he is not merely offering opinions on theology, he is preaching the Gospel and exercising his ministry as the Vicar of Christ."

This was a striking difference from February of last year, when Francis himself — not the U.S. bishops — criticized Vance’s theology interpretation after he called on Christians to prioritize immediate family and countrymen above foreigners.

In an interview with "60 Minutes" Sunday, three cardinals known for being allies of Pope Francis and major players in the 2025 conclave — Cupich; Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington, D.C.; and Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey — backed the pope’s vision for welcoming immigrants and opposing war.

But the interview also showed the bishops’ attempts to appeal to the center, echoing the Vatican’s desire to position itself as a bridge-builder.

For example, McElroy criticized the Biden immigration policy for "getting out of control" and affirmed "strong borders," similar to the rhetoric behind the Dignity Act, a bipartisan immigration reform bill that several bishops are backing.



Cardinals Joseph Tobin of Newark, N.J., from left, Robert McElroy of Washington and Blase Cupich of Chicago in a joint interview with CBS' Norah O'Donnell on "60 Minutes," April 12, 2026. (RNS/Video screen grab/CBS)

Even Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, Bishop Robert Barron, who has hewed closer to Trump than most of the bishops as a member of Trump's Religious Liberty Commission, wrote on X that Trump's comments were "inappropriate and disrespectful" and that he owed Leo an apology.

Barron, who has a large social media following through his Word on Fire ministry, nevertheless praised Trump in the same post, writing that "No President in my lifetime has shown a greater dedication to defending our first liberty," and suggested that it was appropriate to disagree over policy matters with the Vatican in meetings.

One analysis on the far-right news website LifeSite suggested that Trump doesn't need "leftist cardinals to make him look bad" since he "is alienating Catholics all on his own."

Some of the qualified condemnations after Trump's posts could suggest that such U.S. Catholic unity is temporary and that the Catholics who criticized Francis may not unite with the wing of the church closest to the late pope, or may not fully back Leo's reproaches of Trump administration policy.

Nonetheless, the anti-Francis wing of the church was a small minority, with nearly 7 in 10 Republican Catholics expressing favorable views of him shortly before his death. And as Leo recently urged "generous inclusion" for old Latin Mass followers, some conservative Catholics appear more hopeful for his papacy.

In his first interview after becoming pope, with Crux Vatican reporter Elise Ann Allen, Leo said he hoped his U.S. roots "will make a difference eventually with the bishops of the United States."

"The fact that I am American means, among other things, that people cannot say, as they did with Francis, 'he does not understand the United States, he simply does not

see what is happening,’" Leo said.

Whether the unity currently on display among Catholic bishops will hold remains to be seen, but the Vatican appears to be looking to the future.

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