News

New York Archbishop Ronald Hicks smiles after receiving a "Hicks" St. John's jersey during a timeout at an NCAA college basketball game against Xavier, Feb. 9, 2026, in New York. (AP photo/Angelina Katsanis)

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Archbishop Ronald Hicks' eyes sparkle, then get watery when he speaks about immigrants and the missionary years that shaped his priesthood in Mexico and El Salvador. He becomes emotional as he recalls arriving in unfamiliar countries as a foreigner himself — experiences he said taught him humility, empathy and a lasting understanding of human dignity.

Those memories now inform his leadership of the Archdiocese of New York at a moment when immigration, polarization, structural reforms and the future direction of the Catholic Church remain at the center of both political and ecclesial debate.

In a sit-down interview with the National Catholic Reporter on May 13 at his Madison Avenue residence, Hicks presented a vision of the church grounded more in pastoral encounter than culture wars. He returned to what he described as the lens through which he said he looks at every policy or decision: "How do we see each other as brother and sister?"

The conversation ranged across some of the defining challenges facing the Archdiocese of New York and the wider American Catholic Church: ideological polarization, clergy abuse settlements, parish closures and tensions between Catholic teaching and contemporary politics. Hicks repeatedly emphasized dialogue, listening and synodality, particularly in relation to internal clergy divisions and outreach to LGBTQ+ Catholics, while also stressing the importance of remaining "grounded in the truth."

Archbishop Ronald A. Hicks delivers the homily during evening prayer at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City Feb. 5, 2026, on the eve of his formal installation as archbishop of the Archdiocese of New York. (OSV News/The Good Newsroom/Gregory A. Shemitz)

The archbishop also reflected on parallels between his own trajectory and that of Pope Leo XIV, citing their shared missionary experiences and commitment to what he calls a more outward-looking and global church. Discussing his first 100 days in New York, he described being struck by the city's warmth and civic spirit, while acknowledging the growing secularization that is challenging religious institutions.

All of these challenges — to borrow the title of a song by his favorite New York singer Billy Joel, "We Didn't Start the Fire" — were inherited by Hicks from a polarized church and city already ablaze with political, cultural and spiritual tensions.

Yet if Hicks inherited a church under pressure, he also inherited one searching for a different tone.

At 58, the Chicago-born missionary priest arrived in New York carrying a résumé that stood apart from many of the churchmen who previously occupied one of the most visible Catholic offices in the United States. Before becoming an auxiliary bishop in Chicago and later a bishop of Joliet, Hicks spent years working in Mexico and El Salvador, experiences that immersed him in migrant communities, poverty and the realities of life beyond the institutional church. Friends and colleagues often describe him less as a culture warrior than as a bridge builder.

That background now places him at the center of one of the country's most complex Catholic landscapes.

Archbishop Ronald Hicks of New York gives remarks at a Catholic Charities New York food distribution event in Washington Heights, Northern Manhattan, on Holy Thursday, April 2. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

The Archdiocese of New York remains both a spiritual powerhouse and an institution under strain. It oversees nearly 300 parishes, over 150 schools and many charities across a sprawling and culturally diverse region. It also faces declining church attendance, financial pressure, clergy shortages and the second largest proposed clergy abuse settlement in the nation.

The archdiocese's internal divisions mirror broader fractures within American Catholicism itself, where debates over immigration, LGBTQ+ outreach, liturgy, political identity and the pope's leadership have increasingly become proxy battles for competing visions of the church.

Hicks does not deny those tensions. But throughout the interview, he repeatedly returned to the language of encounter.

"I start with relationship first," he said. "How do we see people? How do we see each other as neighbors? How do we see each other as brother and sister? And that becomes the lens that I look at every policy or decision or how we live it about in society."

For Hicks, immigration should not be seen just as a policy dispute but also as a deeply personal subject.

Then-Fr. Ronald A. Hicks is pictured in an undated photo blessing children during an Ash Wednesday Mass while he was based in El Salvador from 2005 to 2010 as regional director of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos, working to help vulnerable and impoverished children. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Extension)

"We are a country that needs laws and we're also a country of immigrants," he said. "Everyone knows that we need to look at some significant immigration reform and have good laws and continue to strive for that. At the same time, when we're doing that, how do we see people? How do we treat people? Where is human dignity?"

This issue is not abstract for him. Long before he became archbishop, Hicks lived as an outsider himself. He spent time in Mexico before ordination and later served for five years in an orphanage in El Salvador while also working throughout Central

America. Those years, he said, permanently changed how he understands both faith and society.

"It's shaped me. It's formed me in a certain way of, again, seeing everyone as my brother and sister," he said.

"One of the practical things of going to live in another country, especially when you don't speak the language, it's a humbling experience," Hicks said. "It's humiliating from the real sense of the word. You could be as smart as you can be, but when you can't communicate, and then you have to learn that day by day by day, it taught me to have some sympathy and empathy for those who are taking their first steps and struggling with it here."

He paused before continuing. "How patient am I? How compassionate am I? How about we as a church?"

That missionary formation has become central to how observers interpret his rise within the church, especially under Leo. The parallels between the two men are striking. Both emerged from the same city of Chicago. Both spent formative years as missionaries in Latin America. Both emphasize pastoral presence, listening and a global understanding of Catholicism rather than a national or ideological approach.

Then-Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Ronald A. Hicks listens to a speaker Nov. 13, 2018, at the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"He and I have both been called to a missionary activity of the church," Hicks said. "That missionary activity has invited us to minister locally, which is wonderful and enriching, and then to also go beyond our own borders and experience the global church."

"I think as he's calling more of us to leadership within the church, he's looking for that global perspective," Hicks said. "How do we all relate as a church to each other? A church that is a missionary church, not self focused, not self referential, but a church that sees all voices as important."

The emphasis on synodality — Pope Francis' signature process of listening and shared discernment that Leo said he intends to continue — is something Hicks similarly emphasizes. For supporters, synodality represents a more participatory and

listening church while critics worry it can become vague, bureaucratic or doctrinally confusing. Hicks insists it means neither abandoning Catholic teaching nor ignoring disagreement.

"Under the Catholic umbrella, there are going to be different visions and different points of view," he said. "We have to be a church of dialogue and realize that just my point of view might not be your point of view."

At the same time, he added: "It doesn't mean that everything's just relevant and open to debate, but there's something truly that we believe in, and that's our core, that's our belief."

The challenge of balancing openness with clarity has become especially acute in New York, where internal church divisions often feel as politically charged as the city itself.

Priests and lay Catholics across ideological lines in the archdiocese spoke to NCR about their frustration over polarization. Some conservatives fear doctrinal ambiguity while progressives believe church power has remained overly centralized and insufficiently transparent over the past 20 years. Others simply feel exhausted by years of ecclesial conflict.

New York Archbishop Ronald Hicks walks with a cross during the "Way of the Cross" over the Brooklyn Bridge on Good Friday, April 3, 2026, in New York. (AP photo/Ryan Murphy)

Hicks appeared keenly aware of that fatigue. "I don't want us to all be a group of independent contractors out there," he said when discussing his clergy and what he recently said to them. "I want us to form a presbyterate. We should learn how to relate to each other, pray with each other, talk with each other. ... Not just independent shepherds out there, but those who are serving out there that we do come together, formed as a community, as a group."

Still, Hicks also inherited hard institutional realities.

The archdiocese is currently negotiating a proposed $800 million settlement connected to clergy sexual abuse claims — the second largest of its kind after the archdiocese of Los Angeles' $880 million settlement. Survivors continue demanding accountability and healing, while many Catholics fear the closure of churches,

schools and ministries already struggling financially.

The 2024 closure of the Black Catholics archdiocesan office and ongoing concerns over historic parishes such as Most Holy Redeemer on the Lower East Side have intensified anxiety among many Catholics who worry that financial restructuring could come at the cost of local communities and cultural memory.

Founded by the Redemptorist Fathers in 1844, Most Holy Redeemer has long been regarded as one of the archdiocese's historic landmarks. The parish was designated an official pilgrimage site by Cardinal Francis Spellman and houses a shrine containing 152 relics of saints, while the crypt below the church contains the remains of 85 Redemptorist priests.

The church — with a large Hispanic working class community — was closed on Sept. 1, 2025, after a small piece of plaster fell from the ceiling, but parishioners, a parish committee and their attorney have argued that no independent engineer or architect has publicly verified claims that the structure is unsafe. In fact, the church briefly reopened for a packed funeral Mass in January. Its future remains uncertain, with many parishioners fearing a permanent closure.

If shuttered permanently, Most Holy Redeemer would become the latest in a wave of roughly 100 parishes across the Archdiocese of New York that have been merged, closed or sold over the past 15-20 years. "Whatever decision will be made will not be made abruptly or just unilaterally, but all the different issues will be looked at, studied, listened to, and trying to get to the best solution and resolution possible," Hicks said, about the parish.

Hicks referred to the multi-million dollar settlement announced on May 1 as "an obligation, a responsibility, at least in part, for the healing and the accompaniment of victim survivors. We can't lose sight of that." At the same time, he acknowledged the emotional weight behind parish closures.

"Any sort of loss to the mission, especially places of worship or engagement where people have a history, that's more than a building," Hicks said. "That's like losing a family member almost."

If Hicks sounds cautious, it may partly reflect the scale of the institution he now oversees.

The Archdiocese of New York is not only enormous but symbolically powerful. Its archbishops have historically occupied one of the most visible pulpits in American Catholicism. Figures such as Cardinals Francis Spellman, John O'Connor and Timothy Dolan each left sharply distinct marks on the office, shaping how New Yorkers understood both the church and its relationship to politics.

Hicks appears less interested in cultivating a singular public persona than in developing a style rooted in accessibility and presence.

"What I wasn't expecting was the gracious welcome," he said when reflecting on his first 100 days in New York.

Archbishop Ronald Hicks of New York, right, and CEO of Catholic Charities New York Antonio Fernandez help volunteers distribute food to residents of Washington

Heights in Northern Manhattan, on Holy Thursday, April 2. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

"That welcome, I've done nothing to earn it. It's just been given to me as a gift."

He described encounters with ordinary New Yorkers — a construction worker on the street, someone selling pizza by the slice — who have greeted him warmly. The city's civic energy appears to have surprised him almost as much as its complexity. "New Yorkers want the best for their society and for their church," he said. "They're looking to partnership and to roll up their sleeves and to work hard."

At the same time, Hicks recognizes that the church can no longer assume cultural influence in an increasingly secular society. "We find ourselves in a world that we have to amplify our voice a little bit more and not assume that it's just going to be received or even heard," he said.

Part of that strategy involves communication. Hicks has embraced media in ways some bishops avoid. He hosts a SiriusXM radio program and supports digital evangelization efforts through the archdiocese's Good Newsroom platform — both outreaches he inherited from his predecessor — and he regularly emphasizes livestreamed liturgies that reach Catholics beyond parish walls. "There are many evils to social media and to the internet," he said, "but one beautiful thing about it is it helps expand my capacity to get the message of Christ and the church out there."

His commitment to bilingual ministry also reflects the demographic realities of modern New York. On Sundays, Hicks celebrates both English and Spanish liturgies at St. Patrick's Cathedral. "To have their pastor, their shepherd, there with them, what a great joy," he said of the Spanish-speaking community.

A file photo shows an American flag outside St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Hicks is not the only new public figure in town right now, the other is New York's new mayor, Zohran Mamdani. And although Mamdani differs sharply from church leadership on several contentious issues, Hicks acknowledged those disagreements openly while insisting collaboration remains necessary. "Mayor Mamdani and I have already met," he said. "We agree that there's many things we disagree on." And he quickly shifted toward areas of shared concern: housing and hunger relief, he suggested, offer immediate possibilities.

"The things that we do agree on, and if it can help the common good, let's look for ways of collaboration," he said.

That pragmatic willingness to work across divides also shapes how Hicks responds to recent national political tensions. The relationship between prominent Catholic leaders and President Donald Trump has grown increasingly strained, particularly

over immigration policy, war rhetoric and Trump's repeated social media posts and comments harshly criticizing the pope. Hicks' response to this mirrors his broader pastoral style: calm, measured and institutionally grounded.

He did not address Trump directly but praised the November 2025 statements on immigration issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and highlighted what he sees as Leo's disciplined approach.

"There's a calmness and a peace and also a strength to him," Hicks said of the pope. "He's not lashing out wildly and he's not taking the bait." Instead, Hicks said, the pope responds by emphasizing the church's core mission.

"'Listen, I'm not a politician. I'm here to preach the Gospel,'" Hicks said, paraphrasing Leo's approach.

New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani greets New York Archbishop Ronald A. Hicks during the 265th St. Patrick's Day Parade on Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, in New York City, March 17, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Eduardo Munoz)

The archbishop said he clearly admires the pope's ability to combine firmness with restraint. "His voice, while it's not aggressively combative, it is strong and powerful. As the bishop here in the Archdiocese of New York, I want to be able to amplify his voice also," he said.

That same tone emerged when discussing LGBTQ+ Catholics — an issue that remains deeply divisive within the U.S. Church but especially visible in New York, home to some of the world's oldest LGBTQ+ Catholic communities.

Asked whether he would meet directly with LGBTQ+ Catholic groups, Hicks framed the question within his broader understanding of synodality.

"From the very beginning, I've said it's not only this group, it's all groups," he said.

"I want to have that spirit of synodality, the spirit of listening, the spirit of being open and then looking for the right ways and the forums to do it."

He also appeared wary of turning such encounters into ideological battlegrounds. "When these questions are asked, it's sometimes, 'Do you want to really get into a fight?' " Hicks said. "I'm not so much interested in picking a fight." Instead, he returned once again to dialogue.

"I'm looking forward to listening, to dialogue, to grounding ourselves also in the truth," he said. "Sometimes I think no matter what issue we're talking about, we might not agree on everything that we've said, but at least somehow we can sit at the same table and be open to those conversations."

That instinct — to lower the temperature rather than escalate conflict — may ultimately define Hicks' tenure more than any single policy decision. Even his lighter answers reveal something about the image he hopes to project. His favorite neighborhood? "The one I live in, Midtown." Favorite attraction? "Central Park." Best food? "Pizza. Sliced."

Those who know Hicks from his years in Chicago often describe him as unusually approachable for someone now occupying one of Catholicism's most public American posts. That accessibility may prove valuable in a city where distrust of institutions — religious and political alike — runs high.

When asked what features his leadership style might differ from those who preceded him, he reflected on what he hopes people will eventually remember about him.

"My hope is that 20 years from now, when they're saying, what kind of archbishop has Hicks been?" he said, pausing briefly. "I hope they can see that I've had a real love for Jesus and a desire to evangelize and to help bring his word and his message and his love, the salvation of souls, to as many people as possible."