News



Marine One, carrying President Donald Trump, lifts off from the South Lawn at the White House Oct. 22, 2026, in Washington. (AP/Manuel Balce Ceneta)



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The White House has identified the 12 Catholic bishops who met and prayed with President Donald Trump in the Oval Office on Oct. 22, while defending his record with Catholic Americans amid questions about the gathering's political implications less than two weeks before the midterm elections.

"There has never been a greater president for Catholic Americans than President Trump, and his strong record proves it," White House spokeswoman Taylor Rogers told the National Catholic Reporter.

Rogers said Trump had "stopped the weaponization of the federal government against Christians, proudly defended and expanded our religious rights, pardoned pro-life activists, stopped the chemical mutilation of our nation's children, and protected parents' rights."

The statement came as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops distanced itself from the gathering, emphasizing that the meeting was neither organized by nor affiliated with the conference.

Related: Ahead of elections, White House shares video of Catholic bishops praying over Trump

"This was not something that the USCCB organized. It is not affiliated with the conference. I have no further information," spokesperson Chieko Noguchi told NCR on Oct. 22.

According to a list provided to NCR by a White House official, the Catholic prelates who attended were:

- Archbishop James Golka of Denver;
- Archbishop Jeffrey Grob of Milwaukee;
- Retired Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas;
- Bishop Edward Burns of Dallas;
- Bishop James Wall of Gallup, New Mexico;
- Bishop Steven Raica of Birmingham, Alabama;
- Bishop Thomas Hennen of Baker, Oregon;

- Bishop Michael Barber of Oakland, California;
- Bishop Scott Bullock of Rapid City, South Dakota;
- Bishop William Joensen of Des Moines, Iowa;
- Bishop Francis Kalabat of the Chaldean Catholic Eparchy of St. Thomas the Apostle in Detroit;
- Bishop Elias Zaidan of the Maronite Catholic Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles.

The White House official also identified Mario Enzler, described as "a Catholic liaison to the bishops" in Washington, D.C., among those present.

As of Oct. 23, 11 of the 12 bishops involved with the meeting did not respond to NCR's request for comments.

Bullock, who attended the gathering, told NCR on Oct. 23 that a representative of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, had personally invited him to the White House meeting. "All I know is that one of their leaders or one of their employees contacted me and asked if I would be interested in it," Bullock said.

He added that he did not know how many other bishops had been invited and suggested contacting Heritage for additional details about the gathering's organization.



A group of U.S. bishops pray over President Donald Trump at the White House in Washington in a video posted on X Oct. 22, 2026, by the administration's communications staff. (OSV News screenshot/@MargoMartin47 on X)

Asked whether the participating bishops had informed bishops' conference leadership about the gathering, Bullock said, "I can't say every bishop knew that it was happening, but the USCCB was not unaware of this meeting." He did not specify which leaders were aware or when they learned about the meeting.

The bishop rejected suggestions that the gathering was intended as a political endorsement of Trump, particularly with the Nov. 3 midterm elections approaching. "It really was not intended to be a political meeting per se. We weren't advocating for any candidates or anything," Bullock said.

He described the meeting as an opportunity for the bishops to engage with White House staff on Catholic priorities, including abortion, school choice and the ethical implications of in vitro fertilization.

Bullock explained that the bishops' decision to pray with Trump was motivated by Scripture rather than electoral politics. Citing St. Paul's exhortation in the First Letter to Timothy to pray for those in authority, Bullock said the bishops sought to fulfill that responsibility during their encounter with the president. "We went there and we prayed, and we asked the Lord to instill our leaders with wisdom and also to help them remain humble," he said.

"I'm going to work pretty hard to divorce it from the midterm elections because that's not why we went there," he said.

In an Oct. 27 email to NCR, Kalabat said that although he took part in the three-hour meeting at the White House, he had to leave to catch a flight and so was not among the bishops who prayed with Trump in the Oval Office.*

Speaking to reporters at the White House on Oct. 23, Trump described the gathering with the Catholic bishops positively. "It was a great meeting. Well, they prayed. They mostly prayed. It was actually a very nice meeting. They're great. They were great people," the president said.

Enzler, the "Catholic liaison," is a former member of the Pontifical Swiss Guard who served under Pope John Paul II. He has worked in Catholic education, finance and church administration. He previously taught at the Catholic University of America and served as dean of the Cameron School of Business at the University of St. Thomas in Houston.

He is currently listed as a senior adviser to the president at the Heritage Foundation. The Heritage Foundation did not return NCR's request for comments regarding its role and involvement with the event.

Enzler's presence raises additional questions about the channels of communication between the administration and Catholic church leaders. The White House did not specify in the information provided whether Enzler helped organize the meeting or the precise responsibilities associated with his described liaison role.

Enzler did not respond to NCR's request for comments and further information about the prayer event.

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Cathleen Kaveny, a professor of law and theology at Boston College, told NCR that the bishops' appearance alongside Trump so close to the midterm elections was "a highly imprudent act."

"This looks like it's a calculated political act and endorsement, given the timing of the election and the sponsoring organization," Kaveny said. "And I think that's very imprudent."

Kaveny distinguished the Oval Office gathering from other instances in which Catholic leaders pray for government officials, pointing to Cardinal Robert McElroy's celebration of the Red Mass, traditionally offered for judges and legal professionals. Such occasions, she said, involve praying for the well-being of the broader community and the common good, regardless of whether church leaders agree with the officials' decisions.

"This is not the same thing," Kaveny said, adding that the timing and circumstances of the White House gathering gave it the appearance of "a calculated political act and endorsement."

In a Substack post titled "What Were They Thinking?", Msgr. Arthur Holquin, a commentator on ethics and church debates, wrote: "The question was never whether bishops may pray for a president. The question is whether bishops may allow themselves to be staged, on camera, in the Oval Office, during an election the president is actively campaigning in."

In a video shared by White House communications adviser Margo Martin and by the president's campaign account, Golka leads the prayer while standing beside the seated president, asking God's blessing upon him and invoking the Holy Spirit to protect the nation.

The Denver Archdiocese said in an Oct. 22 statement that it welcomed continued discussion of the sanctity of life and human dignity, while emphasizing that praying for those in public office is a longstanding Catholic practice.

The meeting, however, took place against a backdrop of tensions between the Trump administration and Catholic Church leaders, particularly over immigration enforcement, the treatment of migrants and Trump's criticism of Pope Leo XIV.

The bishops' conference has also sought to emphasize its nonpartisan position ahead of the Nov. 3 elections.

In an Oct. 14 statement, conference president Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City urged Catholics to "put their faith before politics," stressing that the church's contribution to public life is not a partisan program.

"A well-formed conscience does not operate on those terms," Coakley said, warning against the idea that criticism of one's preferred political party necessarily benefits its opponents.

He encouraged Catholics to judge candidates and elected officials by their actions and their commitment to the common good.

The video of the bishops at the Oval Office circulated just 12 days before the Nov. 3 midterm elections, when Catholic voters face competing concerns over immigration, economic pressures and social welfare.

An October Pew Research Center survey found that 42% of Catholic registered voters favored Democratic House candidates and 39% favored Republicans, with 19% undecided or supporting another candidate.

The story has been updated since publication to add further reaction.

**This story has been edited to add Kalabat's clarification.*

This story appears in the **2026 Midterm Elections** feature series. View the full series.