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Denver Archbishop James Golka and a group of U.S. bishops pray over President Donald Trump

Denver Archbishop James Golka and a group of U.S. bishops pray over President Donald Trump in the Oval Office of 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)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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Roman Catholic bishops, leaders of a community in which language, objects and gestures can carry the weight of centuries and evoke profound mysteries, should have an innate understanding of the power of symbols. The bishops, walking symbols themselves by virtue of office and attire, should certainly understand that anything they do in public will speak volumes, intended or not, to their flock and well beyond.

So, when [12 U.S. bishops](#) (no need to stretch for symbolism in that number) gather around to lay hands on and pray over President Donald Trump (we were spared the [AI-generated savior getup](#)) in the heat of a digital-age political campaign, the symbolism is as subtle as an insurrection mob storming the Capitol.

In a brief, recorded session these prelates representing the largest religious denomination on the planet conferred a jarring sanctification of the stunningly cruel and exploitative figure now inhabiting the Oval Office.

We were grateful that the immediate response from the spokesperson for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops was to disown the event. "This was not

something that the USCCB organized. It is not affiliated with the conference. I have no further information," said Chieko Noguchi in answering a question from NCR. No symbolism here: this was a group of bishops acting on their own.

It did not take long for [some of the participants](#) to grasp the realpolitik behind the invitation: They got used by an administration for which abuse of trust is an operating principle.

One of the attendees, Bishop Scott Bullock of Rapid City, South Dakota, explained, first, that the event had been organized by invitation from an official of the Heritage Foundation, and, second, that the bishops' decision to attend was motivated by scripture rather than electoral politics. Placing those two thoughts into the same statement should have carried its own warning. It was begging us all to believe the assenting bishops were either blissfully ignorant of reality or intentionally duplicitous.

The Heritage Foundation designed the [vile Project 2025](#) that contains the blueprint for the destruction of democratic processes and institutions that we are witnessing. That foundation has as much interest as any single entity in preserving what appears to be a failed and increasingly unpopular project that might be held to a bit of account in the upcoming midterms. Now they have the image, a blessing by Catholic bishops, that they could not have dreamed of purchasing even with their access to unbounded funds.

Archbishop James Golka of Denver attempted the day after to [walk back his participation](#), explaining that Catholics regularly pray for civic leaders and that he had no intent of endorsing anyone.

The prayer may have been sincere. The photo-op was pure politics and will be used and manipulated by a president and administration who have shown no restraint in bending reality to their ends.

Perhaps one of the most memorable accounts – and cautions – resulting from the event is [a statement from Archbishop Jeffrey Grob](#) of Milwaukee. Headlined "A Public Apology," the archbishop explains that he, too, had no intention of endorsing Trump or his projects. The bishops were invited to a private meeting to discuss issues of interest to the church. At the end, they were issued into the Oval office where they received commemorative tokens and were told to stand behind the president to pray. They complied, he said, not knowing they were being photographed and

videoed for public consumption.

"We should never have been put in that position by the White House," Grob wrote. "I did not go without reservations. I wish I had heeded them ... I apologize for any damage my actions have done."

Another participant in the meeting, Bishop William Joensen of Des Moines, [said](#) on Oct. 25 that he wished he would have heeded the words of Jesus before praying in the Oval Office, invoking Jesus' warning that he was sending sheep out into the midst of wolves. "I wish I had been more shrewd and less simple, like those who exploited our meeting for partisan political purposes."

The bishops stand, in moments of high public notice, as representatives of the community. What is essential is to understand that this is no ordinary moment. Donald J. Trump, in the sweep of presidential history, is [incomparably corrupt](#) and stands without peer in that office as an agent of deliberate, ongoing cruelty. As the bishops have apparently learned, he will use and do whatever he might consider necessary to survive from one moment to the next.

The Oval office tableau has consequences. In attempting to explain his participation, Bullock referenced Paul's often misused admonition in the First Letter to Timothy about praying for leaders. Bullock misreads that time and the current era. It is clear that the apostle and other first-century Christian leaders were hardly looking to sanctify or mollify the empire. They were, instead, martyred for preaching truths that unsettled the rule of that era.

Just as there was little that lacked symbolism or that was neutral in the activities of those first-century figures, there can be nothing neutral or beguilingly innocent about the activity of today's religious leaders when they take to the public square.

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The twelve who were recorded praying over Trump in the Oval office have entered history. Trump, calling them "great people," comes away with no sense of the sanction that one might expect from representatives of the Christian Gospel regarding his mass deportation policies. Though some bishops have spoken out forcefully against some of Trump's destructive policies, the president apparently heard nothing in that prayer denouncing the separation of families, the secret

detention of mothers and fathers, many of whom have committed no crime and were simply seeking refuge from terrifying circumstances in their home countries. He felt no sting from those who might have taken him to task for overseeing the bands of masked and heavily armed thugs terrorizing neighborhoods and hauling off many immigrants who were in compliance with legal procedures. He heard no rebuke for the killings of unarmed immigrants, not to mention U.S. citizens in their neighborhoods, nor for sending people off to a torture prison in El Salvador or to lands that our own State Department warns no one should travel to for any reason.

He heard nothing in that session that called him to account for starting a disastrous war of choice that the pope has described as unjust.

Especially unfortunate was the timing, both in terms of the approaching elections and the growing independence being demonstrated throughout the U.S. episcopacy. For decades the U.S. bishops, chasing the political objective of overturning Roe vs. Wade, were captives of partisan politics. Their one-issue approach squandered their political capital and essentially sidelined other major life concerns that are essential components of Catholic social teaching. In agreeing to be staged in the scene with Trump, Catholic bishops once again allowed themselves to be manipulated into a political corner from which there is no escaping.

A deep divide persists in the U.S. episcopal ranks. Prelates such as Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Bishop Robert Barron are the highest profile of those who have turned themselves and the Gospel inside out to accommodate Trump, apparently in hope of some scraps from the rich man's table.

Their acquiescence is offset by the likes of [Cardinals Robert McElroy, Blase Cupich and Joseph Tobin](#), joined by a growing chorus of other prelates strongly resisting the increasing brutality of the Trump regime.

Their numbers include Archbishop Broglio, head of the Military Archdiocese, who has [strongly opposed](#) some of the administration's acts of war as well as threats against other nations. There is also Archbishop Paul Coakley, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, who recently [urged](#) Catholics to place "faith before politics" and to reject rhetoric that appeals to fear, resentment, or division."

The weight of history and the direction of the conference is quickly [moving away](#) from an administration and president who openly attack Pope Leo XIV.

This is not a time for political naivete. The common good is not a calculation in this administration's transactions. What matters most is Trump and company's survival.

Trump's domestic policies referenced above, combined with his administration's gutting of foreign aid in the forms of food for the starving and life-saving medicine for the ill, are wrenching evidence of the degree of cruelty he is willing to engage in pursuit of some strange concept of American dominance. His own criminal past and callous treatment of others, his bragging about his own sexual aggression, his clear preference for dictators and willingness to abandon democratic allies, all of that is hardly worth rewarding with an anodyne prayer on his turf that will be used for his political purposes.

Our tradition, from the heart of the gospel to the deeply established Catholic social justice tradition it inspired, cries out for religious resistance to the Trump project. Any hint of complicity with it is a betrayal of that tradition.

This story appears in the **2026 Midterm Elections** feature series. [View the full series.](#)