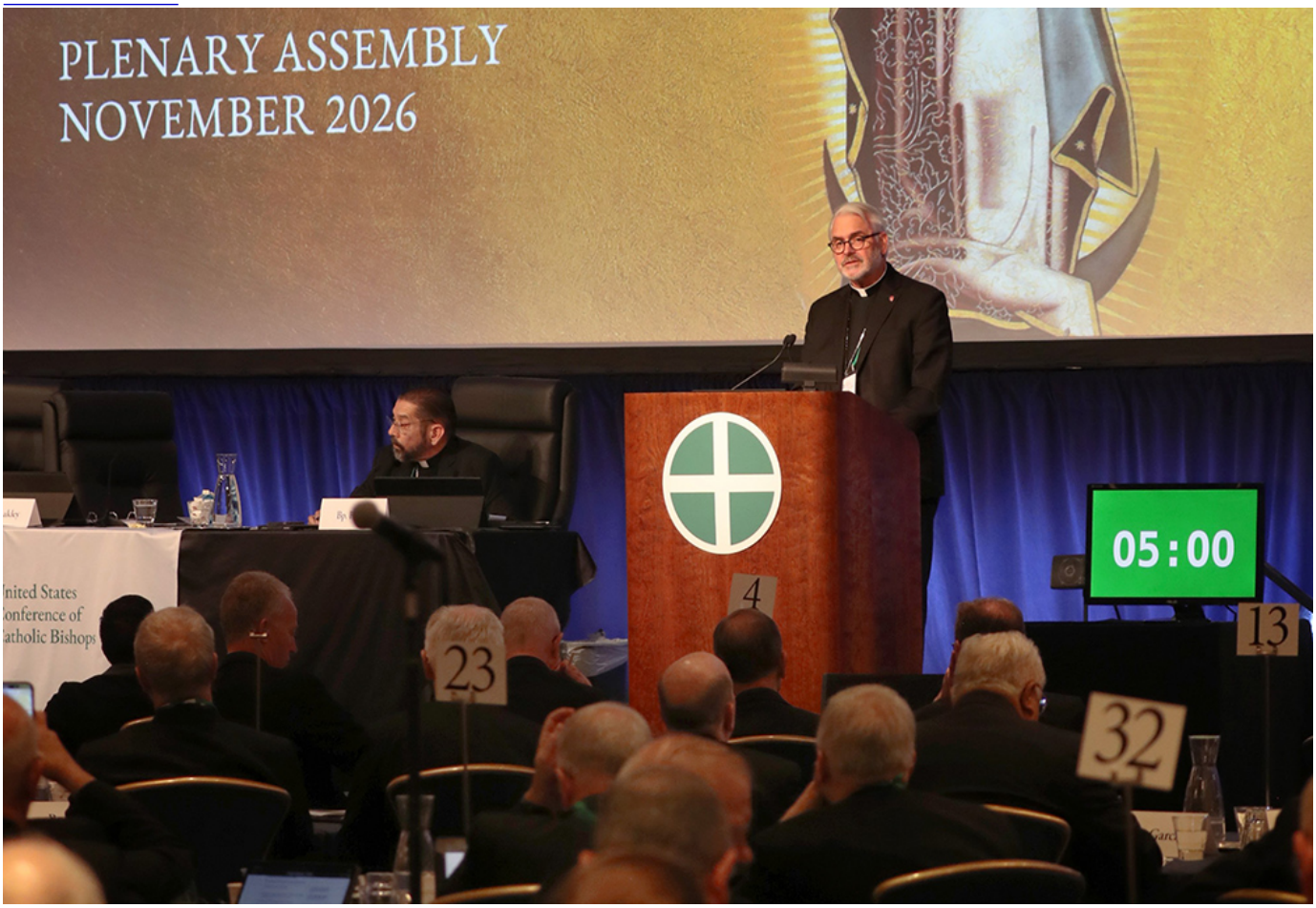
Opinion
NCR Voices



Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, gives his presidential address during a Nov. 17, 2026, session of the bishops' fall general assembly in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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Archbishop Paul Coakley delivered his first presidential address to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at the start of the public session Tuesday (Nov. 17). It was irenic in tone, as he downplayed the divisions within the conference and the larger church.

It was also deadly dull. There was not a single memorable line, except those he was quoting from others. In that sense, it was strangely fitting. The conference is distinguished now for its ability to put a wet blanket on any initiatives, to focus almost exclusively on the internal life of the church, to slow walk the initiatives Pope Francis began. The bishops' conference headquarters building in Washington is half empty, and that seems the perfect metaphor for the state of the conference in this moment.

What was most striking about Coakley's speech, however, was what it left out. He mentioned that he attended an October meeting of the presidents of all the episcopal conferences in Rome, called to reflect "on the impact of *Amoris Laetitia* ten years after its publication." That document was the fruit of Pope Francis' twin synods on the family, synods at which the opposition to the pope first emerged in earnest.

Coakley did not mention that the bishops' conference he now leads has done precisely nothing to receive and implement *Amoris Laetitia*. Nothing.

Speaking of the Rome meeting last month, Coakley said, "There were no contentious arguments, no haggling for points to be made, no bitter disputes; rather, we met to share our experiences around the simple question — what is the state of marriage and family life? That's not to say there were no differences of opinion or experience. There certainly were." He added, "This is not yet the time to share the fruits of those discussions, that will come soon, I hope. We still await the Holy Father's response to the proceedings of the gathering."

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In fact, we know a fair amount about what was discussed at that meeting. Coakley could have saved the cost of his airfare and simply quoted from that news article. It was more informative than his address.

The other glaring omission in Coakley's speech was any mention of the existential threat to migrants, many of them Catholics, perpetrated by the Trump administration. Last year, the bishops adopted a statement in defense of migrants and, even more importantly, produced a short video in which different bishops read the text. This caught fire and garnered more than 100,000 views. Apparently, this year, despite the ongoing unjust arrests and incarcerations, the president of the conference did not think our migrant brothers and sisters warranted a mention.

This past year, there has barely been a week when NCR has not had a story about Catholics defending migrants: from Chicago Catholics fighting to gain pastoral access to those incarcerated in ICE detention centers to the Archdiocese of St. Louis suing to gain access to detainees, to the heroic Catholics of the Twin Cities continuing to protect migrants even after ICE shot and killed two people. Yet not a word from the conference president about any of this.

Pope Francis famously called the Catholic Church to become a field hospital in our broken world. Apparently, as far as the U.S. bishops' conference is concerned, that hospital is closed.

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