

U.S. Catholic bishops grapple with adapting their agenda to Pope Francis' priorities

by [David Gibson](#)

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BALTIMORE (RNS) With a controversial Vatican summit on family life just concluded and a papal visit to the U.S. expected in less than a year, the nation's Catholic bishops on Monday (November 10) began taking steps to adapt their agenda to the priorities Pope Francis set out—an emphasis on social justice and on creating a more welcoming church.

That change in focus has unsettled a number of American bishops who have been used to a hierarchy oriented more toward hot-button culture war issues like fighting abortion, gay marriage and the Obama administration's contraception mandate.

The new shift was underscored by last month's summit, called a synod, where many churchmen used unusually positive language in referring to gay people and cohabiting couples and others who do not always follow church teachings on family life.

In addition, the announcement Saturday (November 8) that Francis moved U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke, a vocal conservative and critic of the pope's approach, out of his curial post, combined with the pope's surprise choice of low-profile prelate Blase Cupich as archbishop of Chicago have upended long-standing assumptions about how the church operates.

The bishops "still haven't fully processed what's taking place right now," said Rocco Palmo, who runs a popular Catholic website, Whispers in the Loggia.

The prelates know they can't go back to the way things were, said Palmo, who was covering the annual fall meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which runs through Thursday.

But, he said, they are still trying to figure out how to adapt Francis' flexible pastoral style to their local situations. "When you come from an institutional mindset," as Palmo said many American bishops do, "that's going to create some apprehension."

In an effort to ease any concerns over what happened at the synod in Rome, the four cardinals and bishops who represented the U.S. bishops at the two-week meeting gave brief presentations to their nearly 300 colleagues meeting in a waterfront hotel here.

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, one of the synod delegates, was especially outspoken in telling the bishops that the media had distorted the message of inclusion that came out of the meeting. Dolan said the synod was not "hijacked" by liberals seeking to change church teaching, nor were efforts to explore changes "smothered" by conservatives forces.

The meeting "was hardly as spicy, juicy, interesting, or pugnacious" as the media portrayed it, he said. "In fact, it was plodding, even at times tedious. But it was a synod of consensus."

Louisville Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, president of the USCCB and also a synod delegate, took a different tack, endorsing the welcoming approach that the synod sought to project—and that concerned doctrinal conservatives—but adding that there was no cause for alarm.

“When I’d come into someone’s home, I wouldn’t start by telling them how I’d rearrange their furniture,” Kurtz said in his opening address to the assembly, referring to his pastoral approach to those who don’t follow church teachings. “In the same way, I wouldn’t begin by giving them a list of rules to follow.”

Instead, he said he would get to know the person, appreciating “the good in their hearts” and acknowledging that he, too, “was in the process of conversion toward greater holiness.” Then he would invite them to try to follow the gospel along with him.

“Such an approach isn’t in opposition to church teachings; it’s an affirmation of them,” Kurtz said.

The bishops will be meeting through Thursday (November 13), and several said they expected a more vigorous debate on Francis’ agenda when they meet behind closed doors for the last two days.

The bishops will also vote for delegates to a follow-up synod in Rome to be held next October on the same family themes—a meeting that will begin less than two weeks after what is expected to be Francis’ first-ever visit to the U.S.

The combination of rapid-fire developments has proved daunting to a hierarchy that by tradition moves very deliberately.

“They’ve got a new pope who has an unusual program—new and different,” said Russell Shaw, a former USCCB spokesman and a columnist for *Our Sunday Visitor*, a popular Catholic weekly.

“They’re just as aware as anybody that the perception of the pope’s program has caused a terrible ruckus in the church in the U.S.,” he said. “So they find themselves in the very difficult position of moving forward with the pope’s program while reassuring people that nothing fundamental is changing or will change in the doctrine of the church.

“It’s hard to do,” Shaw said.