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U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, speaks at a hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington March 1, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Sarah Silbiger)



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U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin will not accept a Catholic award recognizing his immigration work, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich of Chicago [said Tuesday \(Sept. 30\)](#). The announcement follows objections from some bishops over Durbin's support for abortion rights, even as Pope Leo XIV on Sept. 30 called in question the stance against the senator.

Durbin, Illinois' senior senator and the Senate's No. 2 Democrat, had been scheduled to receive a lifetime achievement award at the Archdiocese of Chicago's Nov. 3 "Keep Hope Alive" celebration. The event supports the archdiocese's immigration ministry and National [Pastoral Migratoria](#), an immigrant leadership ministry that started in Chicago in 2008.

"While I am saddened by this news, I respect his decision," Cupich said in a statement. "But I want to make clear that the decision to present him an award was specifically in recognition of his singular contribution to immigration reform and his unwavering support of immigrants, which is so needed in our day."

The cardinal used the announcement to issue a broader warning about divisions within American Catholic life. "As I look back on my 50 years as a priest and 27 years as a bishop, I have seen the divisions within the Catholic community dangerously deepen," he said.

"These divisions harm the unity of the church and undermine our witness to the Gospel. Bishops cannot simply ignore this situation because we have a duty to promote unity and assist all Catholics to embrace the teachings of the church as a consistent whole," Cupich said.



Chicago Cardinal Blase J. Cupich speaks during an interreligious prayer service at Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago Feb. 24, 2025, commemorating the third anniversary of the 2022 Russian invasion on Ukraine. (OSV News/Reuters/Vincent Alban)

Durbin's rejection of the award came on the same day Leo had been [asked about it while leaving his residence at Castel Gandolfo](#). The pope said he was "not terribly familiar with the particular case," but added that Catholics must consider the whole record of a politician's service.

"I understand the difficulty and the tensions," the pope told a reporter, "but I think, as I myself have spoken in the past, it's important to look at many issues that are related to what is the teaching of the church."

He also noted contradictions in political identities on life issues, saying: "Someone who says, 'I'm against abortion but I'm in favor of the death penalty,' is not really pro-life. Someone who says, 'I'm against abortion, but I'm in favor of the inhuman

treatment of immigrants in the United States,' I don't know if that's pro life."

During the past week, 10 U.S. conservative-leaning bishops had publicly opposed Cupich's decision to honor Durbin, citing what they said was the Catholic senator's longstanding record of supporting legalized abortion. Durbin personally opposes abortion but supports abortion rights, according to the [Associated Press](#).

[Related: Wading into Durbin controversy, Pope Leo shows himself attuned to US debates](#)

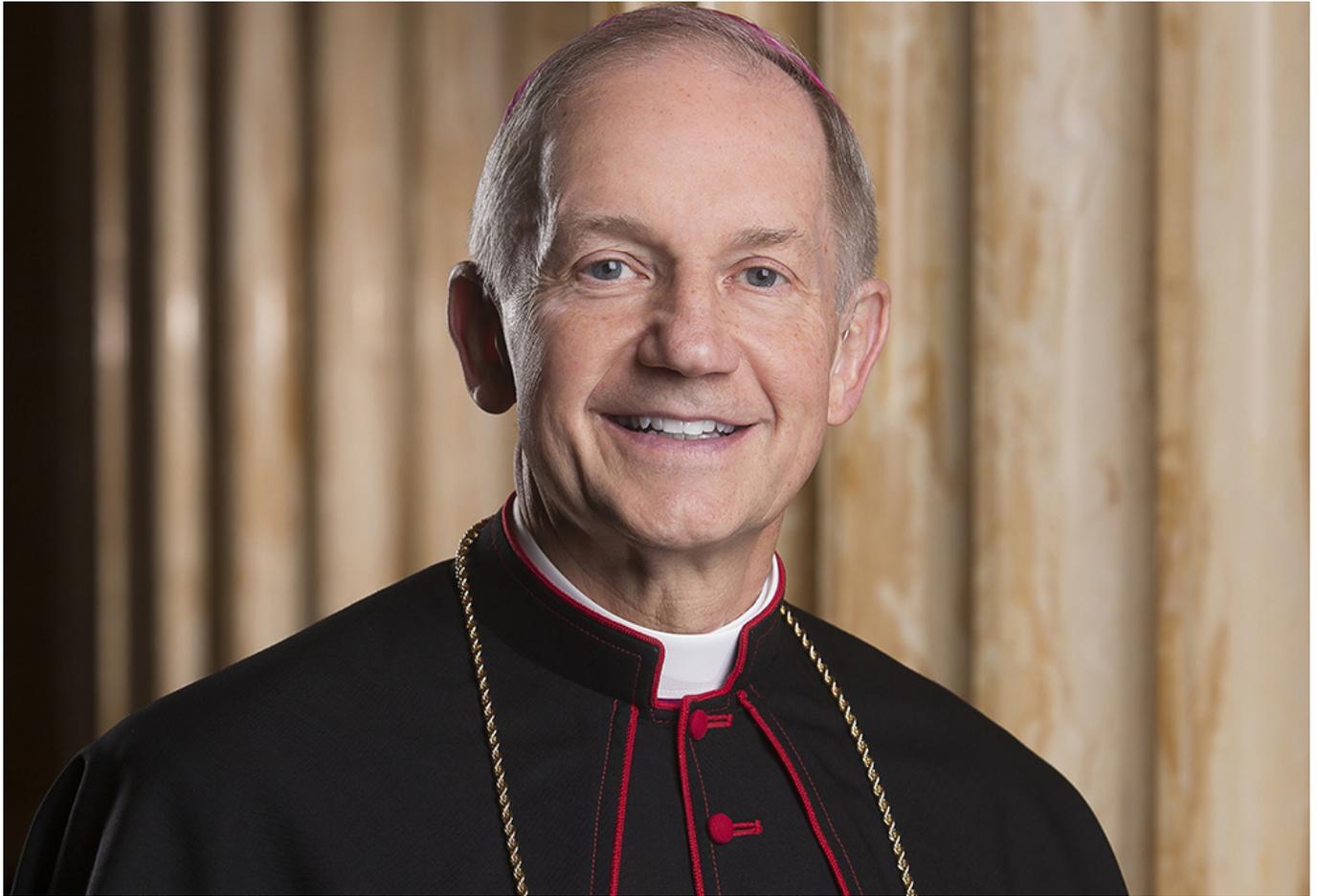
A source familiar with the issue told NCR that Jayd Henricks, former executive director of government relations at the U.S. bishops' conference, was in contact with a group of bishops involved in the campaign to criticize Cupich over the pending award. NCR asked Henricks, currently president of Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal, to clarify his role in organizing the criticism of this honor and about the other bishops who were involved.

Reached by telephone from NCR, Henricks declined to comment on the issue. He also did not immediately respond to a message from NCR requesting further comments.

The Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal is a Colorado-based conservative Catholic group that was previously [involved](#) in funding app data to track gay priests. On Sept. 20, Henricks wrote a [column](#) in The Catholic World Report harshly criticizing Cupich, recounting personal memories of his involvement with him during his days as a former seminarian and employee at the bishops' conference.

The first bishop to publicly object to Durbin's award was Bishop Thomas J. Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, who called the award contrary to church teaching and said it violated both U.S. bishops' policy and the Chicago archdiocese's own guidelines on honoring public figures.

Within a week, nine more prelates voiced their disapproval: Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of San Francisco; Bishops Joseph Strickland, formerly of Tyler, Texas; James D. Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska; James S. Wall of Gallup, New Mexico; David Ricken of Green Bay, Wisconsin; Michael F. Olson of Fort Worth, Texas; Carl A. Kemme of Wichita, Kansas; James V. Johnston of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri; and retired Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann, from Kansas City, Kansas.



Bishop Thomas J. Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, is pictured in a July 11, 2018, photo. (OSV News/Courtesy of Diocese of Springfield in Illinois)

The bishops objected via social media posts, statements and interviews with Catholic news outlets. Some of them warned that giving the award risked scandal, confusion among the faithful or a weakening of the church's pro-life witness.

Durbin did not immediately respond to a request for comment from NCR.

Cupich said that Catholics in the U.S. are increasingly finding themselves "politically homeless," with neither party representing the whole of Catholic social teaching. He noted that Catholics themselves are divided along partisan lines, mirroring the nation's political split. "This impasse has become more entrenched over the years and our divisions undermine our calling to witness to the Gospel," he said.

The controversy over Durbin's award, he argued, reflected this broader problem. "Some would say that the Church should never honor a political leader if he pursues policies diametrically opposed to critical elements of Catholic social teaching," he

said. "But the tragic reality in our nation today is that there are essentially no Catholic public officials who consistently pursue the essential elements of Catholic social teaching because our party system will not permit them to do so."

Instead of "total condemnation," which Cupich said "shuts down discussion," he urged Catholics to highlight leaders' positive contributions as a way of inviting broader reflection. "Praise and encouragement can open it up, by asking their recipients to consider how to extend their good work to other areas and issues," he said. "No one wants to engage with someone who treats them as a thoroughgoing moral threat to the community."

Cupich insisted the archdiocese's decision to present Durbin with this award did not mean it had lessened its stance on abortion. "It would be wrong to interpret the decisions regarding the Keep Hope Alive event as a softening of our position on abortion," he said, citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Since the first century the church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable."

He also said that "the present impasse continues to significantly hamper the church's efforts to promote human dignity across the full range of issues," from "the child in the womb" to "the migrant and refugee" and "those already suffering from climate change and generational poverty."

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In his statement Cupich said, "My hope was that our Keep Hope Alive celebration would serve as an invitation to Catholics who fiercely defend the vulnerable on the border between the United States and Mexico to ponder why the Church defends the vulnerable on the border between life and death, as in cases of abortion and euthanasia." He continued, saying, "Likewise, it could be an invitation to Catholics who tirelessly promote the dignity of the unborn, the elderly, and the sick to extend the circle of protection to immigrants facing in this present moment an existential threat to their lives and the lives of their families."

Cupich recalled words spoken by Pope John Paul II during a U.S. visit, warning America not to lose compassion for "the poor, the weak, the stranger, the needy." Cupich also proposed convening "synodal gatherings" to bring Catholics together for

respectful dialogue. "We can move forward if we Keep Hope Alive," he said.

Durbin, who is Catholic, has long been [at odds with some U.S. bishops](#) over his support for legalized abortion. He has also been a leading Democratic voice for immigration reform during his four decades in the Senate.