News
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Cardinal Donald Wuerl delivers a homily during a 2017 Mass at St. John Paul II Seminary in Washington. (CNS photo/Jaclyn Lippelmann, Catholic Standard)



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Vatican City — October 12, 2018

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Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl, ending a storied, five-decade career of one of the U.S. Catholic Church's most dedicated and powerful prelates after a Pennsylvania grand jury report sparked outcry over his handling of abusive priests in the early 1990s.

While the short Oct. 12 note from the Vatican press office announcing the move did not explain the reasons behind the pontiff's decision, a separate letter to the cardinal from Francis portrayed it as a reluctant one, made at Wuerl's insistence.

In the letter, released by the Washington archdiocese, the pontiff tells the cardinal he saw in the request to resign "the heart of the shepherd" and asks Wuerl to remain on as Washington's apostolic administrator, pending appointment of his successor.

"You have sufficient elements to 'justify' your actions and distinguish between what it means to cover up crimes or not to deal with problems, and to commit some mistakes," Francis tells Wuerl. "However, your nobility has led you not to choose this way of defense. Of this, I am proud and thank you."

Wuerl's resignation comes as Francis is under intense global scrutiny over his handling of clergy abuse cases after a Vatican ambassador released a document in August alleging a systemic cover-up of allegations against now ex-cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Wuerl's predecessor in Washington.

The Vatican has sharply disputed the ambassador's accusations, calling them a "political frame job" against the pope, who has also now promised a "thorough study" of the Vatican's archives for all materials regarding McCarrick.

Wuerl, who is 77 and was appointed to his role in Washington by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006, had been a relatively popular figure in the capital until the Aug. 14 release of the grand jury report, which examined his actions as bishop of Pittsburgh from 1988-2006.

Although the report credited Wuerl with fighting Vatican officials for years to ensure that one abusive priest was not allowed back into ministry, it also raised questions about his actions regarding several other priests who he was informed were accused

of inappropriate conduct.

Wuerl's resignation was received as somber news to some who had worked closest with the cardinal.

Daughters of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, who has served as president of the DC-based Catholic Health Association since 2005, said it will be a "real loss" that Wuerl is no longer leading the Catholic Church in Washington.

"I believe he's done a wonderful job," said Keehan, who has also served as a member of the archdiocese's finance committee under Wuerl and his two immediate predecessors.

The healthcare professional said that because of his actions fighting the Vatican to keep one abusive priest out of ministry in Pittsburgh, Wuerl came to Washington with a reputation "as a guy that doesn't brook any nonsense, particularly in this area."

"I think he came here with everybody having a sense of this is the kind of guy that he is," she said. "He's a very competent manager, as well as very strong in the spiritual part of his mission."

Nicholas Cafardi, an original member and chair of the U.S. bishops' National Review Board, set up in 2002 to monitor the prelates' procedures to protect children, called Wuerl's resignation "an undeserved end to a really fine churchman, a fine bishop."

Cafardi, a civil and canon lawyer from Pittsburgh who has known Wuerl since they lived in Rome at the same time in the 1970s, said that in his view the cardinal "never failed to react to a complaint of child sexual abuse."

Cafardi also noted that some right-wing Catholic groups have been expressing opposition to Wuerl, and calling for his resignation, since at least 2004, when the then-bishop said he would not refuse Communion to then-Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, a Catholic who supported abortion rights.

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"I have to wonder: is this not part of the agenda of the rightwing crowd that is out to end the Holy Father?" asked the former dean of Duquesne University School of Law. "It's hard not to see a political side."

Pressure for Wuerl's resignation had been building for nearly two months. Several protests outside Washington's St. Matthew's Cathedral and the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception attracted dozens, calling on the cardinal to step down as a sign of accountability for his presumed mishandling of cases in Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh Bishop David Zubik announced Aug. 22 that Wuerl's name would be removed from a diocesan Catholic high school. The announcement came after the school's sign had been vandalized, the cardinal's name crossed out with red spray paint.

Wuerl was unusually emotive in an Aug. 30 letter to his archdiocesan priests, asking them "forgiveness for my errors in judgment, for my inadequacies, and also for your acceptance of my contrition for any suffering I have caused."

"I ask you please to let your people ... know that I do recognize and share their pain," the cardinal told his priests.

In an address at the end of a Sept. 2 Mass at a parish in Washington, Wuerl again asked "forgiveness for my errors in judgment" and said he wished "I could wipe away all of this pain, confusion and disillusionment."

The Washington archdiocese's summary of the remarks at the parish noted that "one individual in the congregation expressed anger" as the cardinal spoke -- a video shows a man shouting "shame on you" -- but said Wuerl was "also met with applause and expressions of support from the parishioners."

The cardinal opened a six-week "season of healing" for the Washington archdiocese Sept. 14. In a letter to his priests three days beforehand, Wuerl announced he would be coming to Rome to meet with Francis "so that this archdiocesan church we all love can move forward."

Following the Sept. 14 event, Wuerl had kept an unusually low public profile, making no public appearances and issuing no statements.

The cardinal's blog, normally updated every 3-4 days, has not had a new post since Sept. 13. Wuerl did not celebrate the annual Red Mass, held each year at the beginning of the Supreme Court's term, leaving Auxiliary Bishop Mario Dorsonville to take his place.

Several persons with knowledge of the discussions Wuerl had been having with his staff about whether to resign said the central question in his thinking was what was going to be best for the Washington archdiocese.

"He emphasized that he loves the church in Washington and didn't want to do anything that would impede its moving forward," said someone who has worked closely with the cardinal but asked not to be identified. "That's always been foremost in his mind."

In an Oct. 12 statement, released shortly after the Vatican's announcement of his resignation, Wuerl expressed contrition anew.

"Once again for any past errors in judgment I apologize and ask for pardon," said the cardinal. "My resignation is one way to express my great and abiding love for you the people of the Church of Washington."

Scrutiny of Pennsylvania report

The Pennsylvania grand jury examined the responses of six dioceses in the state to clergy sexual abuse over a period of seven decades.

The mid-August release of its report came as Wuerl was already under scrutiny for his handling of abuse cases after the Vatican in June removed McCarrick, now 88, from ministry when an allegation of abuse of a minor was found credible.

McCarrick later renounced his place in the College of Cardinals in July. Wuerl has said repeatedly that he had never been informed of any prior allegations against McCarrick.

The entirety of Wuerl's 18 years as bishop of Pittsburgh were scrutinized by the grand jury, but among things particularly examined were his actions in handling cases of four priests: Anthony Cipolla, Ernest Paone, George Zirwas, and Richard Zula.

While the report goes to lengths to describe each case in detail, chancery officials in several of the dioceses have pointed to errors, or significant gaps in information, that led to mistaken conclusions.

The officials say the report also does not give an adequate sense of Catholic leaders learning to grapple with the issue of sexual abuse at a time when the Vatican was not issuing clear directives, and incorrectly saw abusive priests as aberrations.

In the Cipolla case, the grand jury notes that Wuerl removed the priest's canonical faculties in 1990, and refused to reinstate him even after the Vatican's supreme court, the Apostolic Signatura, ordered him to do so in 1993.

The future cardinal, the report notes, traveled to Rome to argue against Cipolla's reinstatement, leading the Signatura to reverse itself in 1995. In 2002, Wuerl would seek and obtain Cipolla's forced laicization.

Paone, the grand jury reports, left Pittsburgh for California in 1966, but remained a priest of the Pennsylvania diocese. Although one of Wuerl's predecessors had been advised in 1962 that Paone had been accused of molesting young boys, Wuerl -- or his office -- granted a 1991 request from the Diocese of Reno-Las Vegas for Paone to minister in a parish there.

After receiving a new complaint against Paone in 1994, the Pittsburgh diocese sent him to the Saint Luke Institute, a treatment facility in Maryland. Wuerl, the report notes, also notified the dioceses where Paone had served of the complaint. The report says Paone eventually returned to ministry, now in San Diego, but had his faculties removed in 2002.

Pittsburgh Catholic, the diocese's newspaper, said in an Aug. 24 article after release of the report that when the diocese received the 1991 request about Paone "no one on the diocesan staff remembered Paone or knew of the report of sexual abuse."

The article also acknowledged that the decision to allow Paone to return to ministry "would not be made today," but said it was taken after "a psychiatric examination concluded that he showed no sign of attraction to minors."

The grand jury found that the Pittsburgh diocese was aware of allegations against Zirwas, including inappropriate touching and fondling, as early as 1987. The priest was sent to the Saint Luke Institute, and continued in ministry until 1995, when he

was put on an indefinite leave of absence until his death in 2001.

While the Pittsburgh Catholic article did not reference Cipolla by name in its defense of Wuerl's actions regarding Zirwas, it said the bishop waited to remove Zirwas from ministry because he was "fighting the Vatican courts for the right to remove a priest against his will in a case that had better evidence against the priest."

Zula was found to have been accused of abusing a minor in 1987. He was sent to the Institute of Living, a mental health center in Connecticut, released, and then subject to a criminal investigation in 1988 that charged him with over 130 counts related to child sexual abuse. He was imprisoned from 1990-92, and then laicized after his release.

According to the report, Wuerl authorized a confidential settlement between the diocese and one of Zula's victims in 1989. The agreement included a $500,000 lump sum payment, and a separate amount of $400,000 to be paid over 30 years.

Keehan, who has previously served on the board the Saint Luke Institute, said she hoped Wuerl's actions would be evaluated with consideration of "where psychiatry, law enforcement, and the church was in the 80s and not where we are in 2018."

"The goal at that point was, can we cure them?" said the healthcare professional. "And then we all realized ... that no, you cannot."

Cafardi likewise said that Wuerl acted in the four cases according to the best knowledge of the time.

"He's faulted in the grand jury report for using the treatment model, which is what a lot of bishops were doing in the ’80s through the ’90s," said the lawyer. "They accepted the fact that treatment was a possibility."



Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington is pictured with Pope Francis during the pope's Mass in Washington Sept. 23, 2015. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

"[The allegation] that he did not properly deal with child sexual abuse just isn't the case," said Cafardi. "He dealt with it in the context of the times. And he's being judged now in 2018 by what we know now in 2018 for what he did thirty ... years ago."

"It doesn't seem quite fair to his good name, his accomplishments," added Cafardi.

Ann Rodgers, a journalist who covered Wuerl throughout his tenure in Pittsburgh, first for the Pittsburgh Press and then the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, recalled reporting in 1993 on his efforts to keep Cipolla out of ministry.

Rodgers, who now serves as the director of communications for the Pittsburgh diocese but stressed she was speaking in a personal capacity, recalled that Wuerl did not wish to tout his efforts publicly but did respond when supporters of Cipolla praised the Vatican's ruling that the priest be returned to ministry.

"Wuerl was not happy to be fighting that fight in public," said Rodgers. "But he fought that fight, and he fought it hard."

"He's getting blamed now for not changing the system fast enough, but, at the time, he was one of the few who was really out there leading the charge for change," she said.

Survivor advocate groups had called on Wuerl to resign after release of the grand jury report. In an Aug. 16 statement, the Ending Clergy Abuse group said the cardinal "failed to protect Catholic children and allowed countless Catholic families to be broken."

Wuerl said in a statement after release of the grand jury report that although it "may be critical of some of my actions," it also confirmed that he acted "with diligence, with concern for the victims and to prevent future acts of abuse."

The Washington archdiocese also created a website -- thewuerlrecord.com -- to detail how the cardinal had responded to abuse claims. After widespread criticism on social media that the site resembled something more like a company's defense of its CEO that a diocese's response to clergy sexual abuse, the site was taken down a day after its launch.

Ed McFadden, the secretary of communications for the Washington archdiocese, said in a statement that the website was not meant "to minimize the information from the grand jury report, but to ensure that Cardinal Wuerl’s full record was treated fairly."

"I can certainly understand the criticism, so we have taken it down," said McFadden. "We made a mistake; we’re acknowledging it."

In a statement after the Vatican's Oct. 12 announcement, the chancellor and general counsel of the Washington archdiocese said Wuerl had shown "pioneering leadership" in his handling of abuse cases in Pittsburgh.

That leadership, said Kim Viti Fiorentino, had been "overshadowed by the report’s flaws and its interpretation by media."

The upward track

Wuerl was born in Pittsburgh in 1940, the second of three children to father Francis and mother Mary Anna. Looking back, his career seemed set for a perpetual upward track from the get-go.

After graduating from St. Mary of the Mount parish school in 1958, he earned his bachelor's degree and a master's in philosophy from the Catholic University of America in Washington as a seminarian in the Basselin Scholars Program.

Ordained a priest for the Pittsburgh diocese in 1966, he then served as secretary to the diocese's Bishop John Wright, who took the young cleric to Rome with him when he was appointed to lead the Congregation for Clergy in 1969 and subsequently made a cardinal.

Wuerl earned his master's and doctorates in theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University and the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in 1967 and 1974, respectively.

Already making a name for himself as a theologian, in 1976 Wuerl co-authored *The Teaching of Christ*, an adult catechism that would remain one of the leading sources of church teaching in English until the official Catechism of the Catholic Church was introduced in 1992.

In the conclave that elected Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyla as Pope John Paul II in 1978, Wuerl was one of two non-cardinals present, as Wright had recently undergone surgery and required assistance.

Wuerl returned to the U.S. after Wright's death, becoming rector in 1981 of St. Paul Seminary in Pittsburgh, and was assigned to help then-Burlington, Vt., Bishop John Marshall in a Vatican investigation of American seminaries.

At the age of 45 in 1985, Wuerl was appointed an auxiliary bishop of Seattle, where he and Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen came into conflict. Hunthausen, who had been subject to a Vatican investigation over alleged doctrinal issues, was not informed that Wuerl had been given special faculties over several areas of leadership in Seattle.

John A. McCoy's 2015 biography of Hunthausen, *A Still and Quiet Conscience*, is one of several recent books to detail Hunthausen and Wuerl's difficult relationship, which effectively ended in 1987, when the Vatican restored Hunthausen's full authority at the recommendation of a commission of U.S. bishops headed by Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

McCoy notes that Wuerl was ordained auxiliary bishop in Rome by John Paul II, who also held an unusual private meeting with the new prelate and his friends and family the next day, telling Wuerl that "Christ calls you ... to this special service and the church sends you forth."

John Paul II appointed Wuerl to Pittsburgh in 1988, where he led a parish reorganization plan that closed dozens of church buildings and was lauded at the time for putting the diocese on a sounder financial footing.

Mike Aquilina, who worked for Wuerl as the editor of the Pittsburgh Catholic from 1993-96 and has co-authored three books with him, said the bishop was "warmly received" by Catholics in his native city.

"His actions related to reorganization and clergy discipline struck some folks as extreme, because they were unprecedented," said Aquilina. "But he recognized real problems and chose to act decisively."

The former newspaper editor, who is co-author with Rodgers of a 2015 biography of Wuerl, titled *Something More Pastoral*, also said the bishop was never seen by people in Pittsburgh to be looking to be appointed to another, more prominent, city.

"A person who's just 'waiting to go elsewhere' does not govern the way he governed," said Aquilina. "He was here for eighteen years, and he undertook major long-term projects that were unprecedented and necessary. He was in it for the long haul, and he stayed for the long haul."

Cafardi, who was serving as the Pittsburgh diocese's general counsel when Wuerl was appointed, and continued in the job for several months before moving to Duquesne, praised the way the new bishop consulted with laity in merging or closing more than 100 parishes.

"The model that Pittsburgh used of consulting with the parishioners worked very well," said the lawyer. "He was well loved in Pittsburgh."

Rodgers said she thought Wuerl's fight with the Vatican to keep Cipolla out of ministry was part of the reason he served in Pittsburgh so long. "He was seen as somebody who was absolutely on the rise," said Rodgers.

"All the insiders here ... believe that what brought that to a grinding halt was the Cipolla case," she said. "That by basically refusing to accept this verdict from the

Vatican's highest court and insisting that they take it back and rehear it, he really offended some people in John Paul's inner circle."

Noting Wuerl's previous service at the Vatican and his earlier personal friendship with John Paul, Rodgers added: "He started with an enormous amount of political capital in Rome ... and he spent all of that political capital on the Cipolla case, on trying to make it easier to remove predators."

"Everybody thought he was going to spend five years here and go to some place that was a cardinalatial see," she continued. "But he was here for 18."

'He will do what seems best for the church'

Wuerl eventually left Pittsburgh and came to Washington in 2006, on the appointment of Benedict, who was elected to replace John Paul as pontiff after the now-saint's death in 2005. Wuerl replaced then-Cardinal McCarrick, who at the time was known as a gregarious, friendly figure.



Cardinal Wuerl, right, talks to Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Rev. Jim Wallis, president of Sojourners, during an Easter prayer breakfast in the East Room of the White House April 7, 2015. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)

Stephen Schneck, who worked with Wuerl as the head of the Catholic University of America's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies from 2005-2017, said Wuerl's public persona "was one of a person of great discipline, reticent and relatively quiet."

"McCarrick would have been a hard act to follow because he was so gregarious and so popular and yet I think that Cardinal Wuerl stepped up to fill that role really well," said the political scientist.

Schneck said Wuerl had done a "great job" in Washington and highlighted in particular his role in being a "fair arbiter" between those of varying political persuasions in the U.S. capital.

"The archbishop in Washington ... finds himself caught up in the politics of the nation, and particularly caught up in the church's place in the politics of the nation," said Schneck. "That's a very difficult role. I think Cardinal Wuerl handled that role very, very well."

"Whatever his personal political beliefs were, he was a fair participant with all sides," said the professor. "He was respected I think by both Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. That's hard to do."

Wuerl sparked widespread criticism however for his role in the U.S. bishops' 2011 criticism of St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, one of the country's most prominent and respected theologians.

While Wuerl was serving as head of the bishops' doctrine committee, the group released a statement accusing Johnson of propagating "misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors" about Catholic teaching in her acclaimed 2007 book *Quest for the Living God*.

Johnson would later reveal that the statement came about without prior discussion with her, in violation of the bishops' own 1989 guidelines on handling disputes between bishops and theologians, which specify that theologians facing scrutiny are to be given an opportunity to explain their work.

Cafardi, who came to know Wuerl in the 1970s while he was studying as a seminarian at the Pontifical North American College and the future bishop was working at the Vatican, called the episode "out of character" for Wuerl.

The lawyer said he thought the prelate must have been acting to back up the committee's staff, then led by Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, who has since become a vocal critic of Francis.

"If Wuerl has a fault, it would be defending his staff," said Cafardi. "And I think there he felt he couldn't undercut Weinandy, and he probably should have."

"That is out of character for him," said the lawyer. "He is not a culture warrior bishop. He never was."

Benedict made Wuerl a cardinal in 2010, and appointed him in 2010 as a member of the Congregation for Clergy and in 2012 as a member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In 2013, Francis made him also a member of the Congregation for Bishops, which is responsible for advising the pope on which priests to appoint to lead dioceses around the world.

Despite his resignation from Washington, Wuerl is expected to continue serving on the Vatican congregations until November 2020, when he turns the mandatory retirement age of 80.

As he had for Benedict and John Paul II, Wuerl has strongly defended Francis' teachings, often forcefully rebutting those who claim the first pontiff from the Americas is too doctrinally lax.

In 2016, for example, Wuerl questioned why some were vocally criticizing Francis 2016 apostolic exhortation on family life, *Amoris Laetitia*, which asked pastors to see God's grace at work even in situations which might be seen as contrary to doctrinal norms.

The cardinal noted that the document came out of a multi-year process of consultation, including two Synods of Bishops at the Vatican in 2014 and 2015.

"I find it not all together clear why someone would put their judgment up against the judgment that comes out of all of this magisterial endeavor," Wuerl said then of those criticizing the document. "This was a work of consensus and this was a work that's deeply rooted in the magisterial tradition of the church."

In 2017, Wuerl applauded Francis' move to decentralize most authority for liturgical translations from the Vatican to local bishops' conferences. With that move, the cardinal said, the pontiff was just continuing to put in place the reforms called for by the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council.

Keehan, of the Catholic Health Association, said Wuerl had been "incredibly valuable and helpful" to Francis, and would continue to be so despite his resignation. "I think no matter where Cardinal Wuerl is, he will be supportive of Pope Francis as he was supportive of his predecessors," she said.

Wuerl, Keehan said, is "committed to the church and so, in this and in other things, he will do what seems to be best for the church."

Rodgers said that for the U.S. Catholic Church, Wuerl's resignation represents "the center that didn't hold."

"He was the person who brought things together," she said. "He was somebody who worked really hard on reform and yet is being blamed for the slowness of some of those reforms."

Calling Wuerl a "great defender" of Francis, the journalist also said his leaving the scene would be a loss for those enthusiastic about the pope's vision for the church.

"For people who love what Pope Francis stands for -- for the field hospital, for the church of mercy, for reaching out to those who are marginalized -- this is a tremendous loss," said Rodgers.

"Basically, this situation has been used by other people for their own political agendas," she continued. "And one of those agendas is to undermine this papacy."

During an October 2017 interview, Wuerl mentioned that he had been a bishop at that point for 31 years.

"Every place that I was asked to serve, I have to say that I found joy," he said. "But in Washington, one of the things I have loved from the first day I arrived there was the challenge ... of working with a church that is trying to live the Gospel in probably the most complex diocese in the country."

Noting Washington's role as the country's political capital and the location for major Catholic universities, religious order headquarters, and fervent social justice activity,

Wuerl said he saw his primary duty as bishop as being "the principal, visible sign of unity" among Catholics.

"I said that in my homily at my installation Mass, that I saw this as an occasion for me, in this highly complex community, to join the laity, the religious, and the clergy in saying the Gospel every chance we got," the cardinal said.

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A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 2-15, 2018** print issue under the headline: Wuerl resigns, ending influential tenure in wake of abuse report.