News
Washington Archbishop Wilton Gregory, who four hours earlier had learned Pope Francis had

Washington Archbishop Wilton Gregory, who four hours earlier had learned Pope Francis had named him a cardinal, celebrates his first Mass as a cardinal-designate Oct. 25, at Holy Angels Church in Avenue, Maryland. (CNS/Catholic StandardAndrew Biraj)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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Pope Francis' announcement that he will create Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Washington a cardinal next month, making him the first ever African American to receive the title, is being hailed as an important moment for the U.S. Catholic Church, and especially for Black Catholics at a time of racial reckoning in the country.

"Not only is it a statement that honors the priestly service of Archbishop Gregory, but it is a recognition of the racial divides in America and the need for a cardinal who is invested in healing the racial divides in our nation," Anthea Butler, professor of religion and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, said in an email.

She told NCR that it is recognition that Washington, D.C., one of the most important centers of African American heritage in the nation, is also significant to the Holy See,

adding that Black Catholics like herself have "waited a very long time for this to happen."

Gloria Purvis said that as a Black Catholic working in the nation's capital, lyrics from the song "Lift Every Voice and Sing" — sometimes referred to as the "Black national anthem" — came to mind when she heard the news.

"Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us / Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us / Facing the rising sun of our new day begun / Let us march on till victory is won," she recited.

Purvis, who is the host of the radio show "Morning Glory," had her program cancelled this summer by the Texas-based Guadalupe Radio Network — the largest EWTN radio affiliate in the U.S. — after using it to discuss police violence against Black Americans.

She said that Gregory being elevated to a cardinal is "progress and more" and proof that African American men are capable of leadership in the church.

"This truth was doubted in the U.S. church," she told NCR.

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Fr. Bryan Massingale, a professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University, echoed Purvis' words, telling NCR that Gregory being made a cardinal "is a powerful affirmation of the dogged faithfulness of Black Catholics in the United States, who have kept faith with a church that has not often been faithful to us."

"This is a way of saying that Black Catholics are seen; that we matter in the church," said Massingale in an email, who over a decade ago chronicled the church's ongoing failures toward Black Catholics in his book *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church.*

"His elevation is a sign of hope, another step that the church is slowly becoming truly 'Catholic' and universal," he continued. "It is a sign of hope that his pastoral sensitivity and prophetic voice will be present in the conclave that chooses the next pope."

Massingale also made clear that Gregory being named a cardinal was not merely a symbolic gesture but rather "a recognition of Cardinal-designate Gregory's long

history of leadership on many of the pressing issues facing the church, including racial justice, the scourge of sexual abuse and the treatment of LGBTQ persons."

"In all of these areas, Gregory is an example of Pope Francis' pastoral approach," he continued. "Gregory has a willingness to reach out to and dialogue with those on the margins of both church and society," adding that "he is also a man of courage, as shown by his willingness this summer to challenge any ideological manipulation of the faith to a partisan purpose."

Gregory, who has largely stayed out of politics since being tapped to lead Catholics in the nation's capital in 2019, slammed a decision by the Knights of Columbus-owned John Paul II National Shrine to host President Donald Trump the day after he ordered tear gas against peaceful protestors near the White House advocating for racial justice.

John Carr, who worked as a top advisor for the U.S. bishops for a quarter century, recalled Gregory's tenure as president of the bishops' conference during the first round of clergy abuse scandals in 2002.

"I was the parent of teenage boys, I was a survivor of sexual abuse who had never talked about that, and the conference was dealing with this wave of demoralizing realities," said Carr. "Lots of people said don't overreact, don't give in, don't move too far, don't move too fast, but Bishop Gregory stood up and said we're going to have zero-tolerance [for abuser priests], we're going to have review boards at the national and local level, and we're going to own this and apologize for it."

Carr, who is now the director of the Initiative for Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, characterized Gregory's leadership as "a sign of hope in a time of almost despair," saying that he brought that same approach with him to the Washington, where he arrived over a year ago to find an archdiocese again reeling from the last wave of abuse scandals that implicated its two most recent leaders.

Given Gregory's track record on abuse and the significance of having an African American in the nation's capital during a national reckoning on race, Carr said "Pope Francis is saying that Black leadership matters."

"He is not a symbol," he said. "He is a caring pastor, he is a quiet leader, and he's a courageous voice at a time when we need all three."

As news of his elevation made its way throughout the country, some of Gregory's brother bishops also took the occasion to offer their own tributes.

"By naming Archbishop Wilton Gregory as a Cardinal, Pope Francis is sending a powerful message of hope and inclusion to the Church in the United States," said current president of the U.S. bishops, Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, in a statement.

In Gregory's neighboring archdiocese of Baltimore, Archbishop William Lori said in a statement that "As our country's first African-American Cardinal, he will bring a critically important perspective to his new role, along with the wisdom and deep love of our faith that are so evident in his long-standing service to the Church."

Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh highlighted Gregory's role in shepherding the bishops through the first round of the abuse crisis, saying in a statement that he "demonstrated great wisdom and courage while guiding our Church through some of its most difficult years."

Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago paid tribute to Gregory as a priest of the archdiocese, writing, "While we take particular pride in this recognition of a dedicated priest, whom we are proud to claim as our own, we are also moved that Pope Francis chose this compassionate, thoughtful pastor when our nation and the world are in desperate need of healing and courageous leadership."

In an interview with NCR, Bishop David Talley of Memphis recalled his time as a priest and eventually as an auxiliary bishop in Atlanta under Gregory.

"When he was installed as my archbishop, I was away giving a retreat to the Missionaries of Charity," said Talley. "I felt terrible missing it, but I wrote him a letter and he wrote back saying, 'It's a good thing to take care of the sisters.' That was my introduction to him."

Talley recalled that around 2007, he was dealing with personal family issues when he was then pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church outside of Atlanta.

"I tried to deal with them over the phone and driving to my hometown every once and awhile, but I needed to go there for a bit," he said. "I wrote to [Gregory] saying 'I know this is difficult for the parish, it's difficult for me and it's difficult for you.' "

"He said, 'David, go take care of your family,' " Talley recalled. "He showed me compassion, he showed empathy, and that illustrates who he is as a man, as a leader."

[Christopher White is NCR national correspondent. His email address is cwhite@ncronline.org . Follow him on Twitter: @CWWhite212.]

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