News
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Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington leaves in procession after taking possession of his titular Church of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in the Grottarossa neighborhood of northern Rome Sept. 27. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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ROME — After taking possession of his titular church in Rome — a longstanding tradition meant to symbolize the unity of the pope with his cardinals around the world — Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington said he is "saddened" by the tensions in the U.S. church and sees it part of his job to bolster Pope Francis' ministry.

"Francis has provided extraordinarily generous, kind and sensitive leadership to the church throughout the world," Gregory told NCR. "And I hope in whatever way I can to assist him in that, to support him in that, and to be available to whatever he might ask me to do, and buttressing and supporting his papal ministry."

The cardinal's words came outside of Santa Maria Immacolata in Grottarossa, on the northern outskirts of the city, where he formally took possession of the small church on Sept. 27 in a service delayed by almost a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gregory was elevated to the College of Cardinals last November and is the first African American to receive the honor.

The 73-year-old prelate's increased profile in the U.S. church comes at a time when the entire country is facing a reckoning on race and as the leadership of the U.S. church is deeply polarized over Pope Francis and also President Joe Biden, the nation's second Catholic president.

Both Francis and Gregory have indicated they would like to have warm relations with the new president, while other U.S. bishops have advocated for Biden to be denied Communion given his political support for abortion rights.

At a meeting of U.S. bishops' last June, Gregory spoke against such measures and warned that in his 38 years of being a bishop, he had never seen the bishops' conference so divided.

On Monday, he told NCR he stands by that assessment.

"I certainly do still see the divisions there and they trouble me," the cardinal said. "They sadden me."

In looking ahead to the next assembly of U.S. bishops in November, Gregory said the U.S. bishops need to look to Pope Francis' emphasis on "encounter" to overcome their own divisions.

"What I think we have to do more frequently and more effectively is something that Pope Francis has urged the entire church to do. We have to encounter each other," he said.

"We have to see in each other, even when we disagree, that this is a brother or sister in Christ, for whom Christ has a measurable love, and invites me to love them in return," he added.

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Built in 1935 in what was then surrounded by farmland, the suburban church on the peripheries of Rome was made a titular church in 1985 by Pope John Paul II. Gregory is only the second cardinal assigned to it.

While cardinals are not involved in the governance of their titular churches, the symbolic possession of a titular church is meant to signify the unity of the pope and the members of the College of Cardinals.

During the noontime prayer service, Gregory was joined by nearly 50 local parishioners, along with approximately a dozen seminarians from the Archdiocese of Washington currently studying at the North American College in Rome.

Fr. Valerio Bortolotti officially welcomed Gregory to the parish, recalling that the small church was built by a rich landowner for his workers and dedicated to Mary, the Immaculate.

"In this land of dreams you have been called to dream that this cross and this mother take even more possession of your heart," he said in greeting the American cardinal.

The cardinal, speaking in Italian, told those gathered that he was grateful for their warm welcome and asked that they remember him and the Archdiocese of

Washington in their prayers. He promised he would do the same.

"Whenever I recall Our Lady's title," said Gregory, "I will be united with you and your families and clergy in prayer."