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Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory delivers a Zoom address Feb. 3, 2022, on "Race and the Catholic Church" during a Black History Month event sponsored by the St. Thomas More Catholic Community at Yale University. (CNS screen grab/Richard Szczepanowski, Catholic Standard)

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WASHINGTON — People must "reject all forms of racism, bigotry and injustice" and recognize "we are each made by God and are deserving of respect and dignity because of just that," Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory said Feb. 3.

Only then will mankind "live the way we were intended to live by the Creator," he said in a Black History Month address.

"We each are called to reach beyond ourselves — that which is comfortable and familiar. As a human family, we are to be a good neighbor to one another," Cardinal Gregory said. "This is the only way to bring about true justice for all American and global citizens."

He spoke on "Race and the Catholic Church" for an event sponsored by the St. Thomas More Catholic Community at Yale University. The address was delivered via Zoom because of the ongoing pandemic.

"I wish we were together in-person," he said, because "I believe conversations about race are best had in-person so we can encounter one another as sisters and brothers created in the image and likeness of the Lord, the Creator of the human family."

Lamenting that "racism, intolerance and discrimination come in a variety of forms — both overt and covert," Cardinal Gregory noted that when the faithful are open to racial diversity, "they see the inherent beauty of God's creation in the mosaic of mosaic of skin tones, facial expressions, cultures and ethnicities."

He pointed out that "some of the very first Catholics (in this country) included free Black Catholics, who arrived from Protestant England on the Eastern shores of Maryland in 1634," but yet "in the Catholic Church, we do not have a story of unity or history of mutual respect."

"We are a church and a nation of immigrants who willingly or unwilling fled to or were brought to these shores — some in chains and in bondage," Cardinal Gregory said.

"Racism is sometimes seen as America's original sin," he continued, "and the reality of America's original sin has denied or limited many African Americans from living out their calling to become full members of the Catholic Church as priests or religious and certainly, to fully attend or teach in higher education."

Acknowledging "polarization both inside the Catholic Church and in our wider society," Cardinal Gregory said society is "experiencing a generally accepted, pervasive negative brashness."

"There is often acceptance of openly, unapologetic racist language, hostility and consistently uncivil behavior," he said. "Civility is no longer a treasured American virtue we agree to live by. Civility does not come naturally to any of us, but it is a quality that can be cultivated. Civility, charity and service are needed in order for us to successfully work toward common ground that benefits all."

During Black History Month, observed in February, and every month, he said, "we must work hard to practice civility in our challenging discussions about race and every other issue that touches our families and our communities."

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"The mission of the Catholic Church is to serve all of God's children regardless of their ethnicity, culture, immigration status, race, or religion," he added.

Responding to questions from Yale's St. Thomas More Catholic group and its African American ministry, Cardinal Gregory spoke of how the church can reconcile its past of racism, colonialism and slave ownership.

"We must admit our involvement and admit the sins we have shared in, maybe not personally, but we inherit the legacies that that sin has left in its wake," he said.

"I am very, very proud of the Jesuits in the United States as they are coming to an acceptance and an understanding of their awful selling of slaves to keep Georgetown University and perhaps other Jesuit institutions afloat,' the cardinal said. "They are expressing a contrition and a desire to do what is right. Reconciliation and retribution are very difficult, but they (the Jesuits) are willing to walk that path."

He also referred to the U.S. bishops' 2018 pastoral letter on racism, "Open Wide Our Hearts," and other documents the bishops have issued that address racism.

"We have to make known all the statements and the good work the bishops have done," Cardinal Gregory said. "We haven't done enough, but what we have done is often unknown."

In August 2020 during a Mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington marking the anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, then-Archbishop Gregory launched "Made in God's Image: Pray and Work to End the Sin of Racism," a new Washington archdiocesan initiative.

It includes a wide range of pastoral activities and outreach for individuals and parishes, such as prayer, listening sessions, faith formation opportunities and social justice work.

When Pope Francis appointed him as Washington's new archbishop in April 2019 and he was installed the next month, he became the archdiocese's first African American archbishop. When he was made a cardinal Nov. 28, 2020, he became the nation's first Black cardinal.

In his address to the Yale group, Cardinal Gregory said parishes must welcome, acknowledge and embrace people of different ethnic backgrounds or races, otherwise it is more than "a lack of welcome" — it is "outright hostility."

"When we are teaching about the nature of sin, we talk about sin as an action, but sometimes sin is an inaction. We tolerate by our inaction the sin of racism," he said. "What we as Catholics need to do better is to learn how to welcome people."

With the church currently hosting listening sessions on synodality in preparation for the October 2023 world Synod of bishops, the cardinal said now is the time "for us talk to one another and to listen to one another."

"We have to listen to our people and invite them to speak from our hearts. Listening does not mean agreeing. It means opening our hearts to hear and listen to those we disagree with," Cardinal Gregory said.

"In the Catholic Church there have always been disagreements — theological disagreements, cultural disagreements. It is not new," he said. "But we have to open our hearts and our eyes to reconcile and unify the church in all of its fullness."

He said welcoming persons of varied ethnicities or cultures or colors into a parish "is more than simply tolerating people."

"Our welcome must be an aggressive and straightforward desire to say, 'We want you here, not to become as we are, but to come as you are'," Cardinal Gregory said. "We have to say, 'You have a place at the Lord's table, and we are enriched to welcome and accept you as you are.'"

He said Catholic young people can help combat racism and discrimination and work to build a better society.

Black History Month is a time to "promote peace, racial harmony, and social justice instead of fear, harm and violence," Cardinal Gregory said.

He said his wish is that as young people learn of "the injustices and indignities suffered and overcome in our American history," it would inspire "real hope for us all to do the necessary and sometimes challenging work of our time."