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Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory celebrates the annual Mass commemorating the legacy

Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory celebrates the annual Mass commemorating the legacy of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on Jan. 15, 2023 at St. Joseph Church in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. At left is Washington Auxiliary Bishop Roy Campbell Jr., the pastor of St. Joseph's who concelebrated the Mass sponsored by the Office of Cultural Diversity of the archdiocese. (OSV News photo/Tyler Orsburn, Catholic Standard)

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is best honored when people "recall to mind and heart that the issues Dr. King placed before our nation have not been adequately accomplished," and strive to continue his work, Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory said during a Jan. 15 Mass honoring the legacy of the late civil rights leader.

"Dr. King's national holiday will provide a welcome respite from work for most Americans," Gregory said at the Mass, "but it cannot, and it must never, be used to provide any diminishing in our determination to bring about the fulfillment of that dream that he held out before America, a dream unfortunately still deferred for far

too many Americans from every region, of every race or who speak a different language."

Gregory was the principal celebrant and homilist of the Mass at St. Joseph Church in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Washington Auxiliary Bishop Roy Campbell Jr., St. Joseph's pastor, concelebrated the Mass which was sponsored by the Archdiocese of Washington's Office of Cultural Diversity.

The Mass and celebration, which began with a praise and worship service featuring the St. Joseph Gospel Choir, are held annually near Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the federal holiday observed on the third Monday of January. This year, the holiday was observed on Monday, Jan. 16.

The cardinal told those at the Mass that "despite the God-given progress for which we must also today offer prayers of thanksgiving," society must address "the unfinished agenda (of Dr. King) that still confronts our society each and every day."

"We are still a nation with too many strangers. Our lives -- when they do not intersect in open hostility -- still seem to pass as parallel lines often at great distance from each other," he said. "We are still discovering, and frequently with great surprise, that we are a diverse people, and that diversity, far from being a threat, can be and ought to be received as a blessing. "

During the Mass, prayers were offered that "the dream for truth and justice of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. inspires all people to work for equality among all members of our society." The prayer was a reference to Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

On Aug. 28, 1963, Dr. King was among the leaders who organized a March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The march included a rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that was opened with an invocation by Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle, then the Catholic archbishop of Washington. It was at that rally that Dr. King delivered the "I Have a Dream" speech.

In that speech, Dr. King spoke of his dream where "my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day … little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

"Dr. King courageously and consistently invoked the truth of the Gospel in calling the men and women of our nation to live as sisters and brothers. The truth that he announced reflected the light that is Christ Jesus," Gregory said at the Mass. "We who are the followers of Christ in a church that is simultaneously universal as well as one must be active participants in the healing of any residual wounds of racism, bigotry and intolerance that still plague this wonderful ecclesial family of ours."

Dr. King was assassinated almost 55 years ago. In late March 1968, he traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, to support Black sanitation public works employees who were on strike seeking higher wages and better working conditions. On April 4 of that year, Dr. King -- standing on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel -- was mortally wounded by a gunshot fired by James Earl Ray. He was taken to St. Joseph Hospital, where after emergency surgery he was pronounced dead.

Gregory said that while Martin Luther King Jr. Day is a federal holiday, "most dioceses have established the honored practice of such a prayer event" as the one hosted by the Archdiocese of Washington. He said the event not only celebrates Dr. King, but anticipates February's Black History Month.

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Calling the next few weeks "a season of racial and cultural pride" for African Americans, Gregory said it is a time to "focus with fervent attention on the pride which is rightfully ours in our unique and God-given heritage and history."

"People of color throughout our nation are justifiably proud of the heritage of Dr. King because he represents for us and for all people a rich example of the contributions African Americans have made to this nation," the cardinal said.

The cardinal also noted that some may question "the need and indeed the prudence" of such observances as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day or Black History Month. He pointed to the extensive media coverage usually given to urban riots, the many aggressive conflicts between law enforcement personnel and people of color, the occasional expressions of antipathy between African Americans and those neighborhood merchants from other cultures and races, and "the depressing fact of the all too prevalent events of Black-on-Black crime and violence."

"Like all of you I wince and grieve when I hear or read of racial and racially motivated conflicts," he said. "Like all of you I wish there were more attention paid to the moments of grace and justice in America rather than the constant highlighting of the sinful and destructive elements that are still to be found within our society."

Gregory said that "in a unique way, America holds out the promise of being a common home to a great host of people of different cultures, races, languages and ethnic heritages."

He pointed that when people identify themselves as "African Americans, Black Americans, Native Americans, Indigenous Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans or just plain Americans," they are not just engaging in "tentative and highly linguistic nuances," but instead are reflecting "a wholesome desire on the part of all people to acknowledge with sincere respect one of the more fundamental dignities of any people -- the right to identify and determine their own identity."

He urged those gathered for the Mass to rededicate themselves "to a richer expression of the dignity and unity that ought to be the hallmark of our nation and … the very foundation of our church itself."

Gregory has a long association with the late civil rights leader. Gregory previously served from 2004 to 2019 as the archbishop of Atlanta, Dr. King's birthplace. He has preached in Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, where both Dr. King and his father preached, and in 2006, he was inducted into the Martin Luther King Board of Preachers at Morehouse College in Atlanta. In 2019, then-Archbishop Gregory was appointed by Pope Francis to become the archbishop of Washington, and the next year, the pope named him as a cardinal, making Gregory became the first African American cardinal.