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Cardinal Gregory, wearing a mask and a red biretta, kneels in front of Pope Francis, wearing a

Pope Francis finishes presenting a ring and scroll to new Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington during a consistory for the creation of 13 new cardinals in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Nov. 28, 2020. Gregory is the only Black cardinal in the United States. (CNS photo/Stefano Spaziani, pool)

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As Pope Francis prepares to mark the tenth anniversary of his pontificate in March, one hallmark of his papacy has been to make both sides of the American political aisle "uncomfortable," panelists, including Washington's Cardinal Wilton Gregory, said at a Feb. 28 event hosted by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life.

Francis, formerly Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was elected pope on March 13, 2013, after Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation. During his pontificate, Francis has rejected the notion of the church as a political entity, instead stressing themes like caring for those on the peripheries and creation. But his approach to the interconnected themes of Catholic social teaching as a seamless garment does not

fit seamlessly into American political ideologies, the panelists said.

Gregory said Francis has made it "totally uncomfortable to take great comfort in any one dimension of the church's social teaching."

Noting that the Washington audience was likely aware of heightened political polarization in the United States, the cardinal added, "there are so many examples of how we find it difficult to talk to each other."

"And (Pope Francis) makes it possible for us to say, if you really want to be adaptable, you've got to embrace the whole church's social teaching," Gregory said. "So you can't be comfortable with just the pro-life banner; you can't be comfortable with just the progressive social (issues) -- you've got to have them all."

Gregory said his four years in Washington have shown him how urgently the country must address the "challenges" associated with polarization.

"It's clear that we've got to do something to allow people to speak to each other with civility, honesty, charity, and not feel that there are winners and losers, feel like either I win or you win," Gregory said. "Francis says, why don't we both win by understanding the breadth of the Catholic faith and approaching complex issues with a reverential deference to the truth?"

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Sr. Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in Brownsville, Texas, praised Francis for "breaking down barriers" and encouraging the church to get out of its "bubble" to meet "those who are at the margins."

"You know, I always invite everyone to come and see; (you) need to see the families, you have to see the faces, the children and the tears, and be really close, so that you can understand what he's talking about," Pimentel said of her organization's work at the border. "It's only then that you know what you need to do. Because I think God created us in a way to care for one another. And Pope Francis knows that perfectly and he's really inviting us to do that -- that's why he pushes us to the peripheries because that's where those are that are left out, that are marginalized, that are really struggling -- they don't fit into the church that we've made."

E.J. Dionne, a columnist at The Washington Post who has written about Francis and how he affects U.S. public life, as well as a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a professor at Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy, said that Francis has forced Catholics to see the "shortcomings" of either political side.

"On abortion, for example, where there are a lot of progressive Catholics who actually don't believe abortion should be made illegal, but I think what Francis does is force them to think about well what do you do? What is the responsibility? What is the responsibility to reduce the number of abortions if you're not going to make it illegal?" Dionne said. "And obviously, for more conservative Christians, he challenges them on issues related to social justice, government aid to the poor. And so he forces you to think hard about how what you believe relates to church teaching and Catholic social thought."

Gregory praised Francis for an "accessible" papacy both in his public appearances and in his writings.

"It's hard to dislike a person who likes you," he said.