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Washington, D.C., Cardinal Wilton Gregory gives his July 21, 2023, keynote address at Congress XIII of the National Black Catholic Congress, held July 20-23 at the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center at National Harbor, Maryland. (OSV News/Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada)



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Black Catholics have overcome generations of anguish, suffering and injustice by keeping the faith, Washington, D.C., Cardinal Wilton Gregory told the 13th National Black Catholic Congress on July 21, the first time in the event's 134-year history that a Black U.S. cardinal existed to address the Congress.

"We have kept the faith, even when many could not understand why or how we have kept the faith," Gregory told the crowd during his keynote.

"The Eucharist gives us the energy and the impetus to continue to strive for justice. The Eucharist nourishes us," he said.

The attendees, estimated by organizers at about 3,000 people, gave Gregory a standing ovation even before he began to speak in National Harbor, Maryland, part of Gregory's archdiocese.

"It was not so much an honor for me personally, but a recognition of the faith of the people from which I came," said Gregory of his elevation to cardinal in response to a question after the keynote address. Pope Francis made Gregory a cardinal in 2020.



A painting of a Black Madonna and child served as a selfie station for National Black Catholic Congress attendees. About 3,000 people attended the July 20-23 event in National Harbor, Maryland. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

"We are living, breathing testaments of how much God loves us," Gregory said, standing before images of the six Black American candidates for sainthood displayed prominently at the front of the plenary hall.

"The six holy souls currently under scrutiny in the process of canonization in Rome serve as sources of great pride and inspiration for Black Catholics," said Gregory,

who later quoted from Franciscan Sr. Thea Bowman's 1989 address to the U.S. bishops, which he had witnessed.

Many in the crowd spoke Bowman's words, "I bring myself; my Black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become," along with Gregory. Bowman is one of the six Black candidates for sainthood.

Gregory, who, with retired Memphis Bishop Terry Steib, held a town hall for the 13- to 18-year-old attendees of the Congress on July 20, said that the youth are not the church of tomorrow, but instead "are the energetic, thoughtful, passionate church of the now."

The cardinal highlighted both Francis' teachings and initiatives on synodality and the U.S. bishops' Eucharistic Revival. "These are new and innovative ways to place us in renewed relationships, growing in holiness, even as we grow deeper in our love for Christ Jesus," he said.

The theme of the 2023 Congress "Write the Vision: A Prophetic Call to Thrive," held July 20-23, came from the second chapter of the Old Testament's Book of Habakkuk.

"God's finely focused vision for us, which sees beyond whatever obstacles loom before us, must become our vision for one another," Gregory said.

Religious sisters pray during the opening Mass for the 13th National Black Catholic Congress J

Religious sisters pray during the opening Mass for the 13th National Black Catholic Congress July 21, 2023, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. (OSV News/Archdiocese of Washington/Jaclyn Lippelmann)

Gregory acknowledged the hardships that many attendees were facing in the present day.

"As if the daily headlines incessantly announce unspeakable acts of violence and racism in our neighborhoods, workplaces and schools aren't enough to weigh us down, for too long, the pandemic prevented us from even being able to gather in fellowship," he said.

"Our faith must not be dampened by the sheer heartlessness of people that so often seem to surround and confront us," he told attendees.

"Prayer, especially our prayer at the Lord's table during the celebration of the Eucharist, is our foundation," the cardinal said. "The Eucharist strengthens us, soothes us and heals us, so that we may build lives that radiate the love, the care and the peace that we so desperately need and desire."

"We must bring Christ's healing presence to a world that too often only pulses with despair. We are called in the Eucharist to be Christ's light in spaces of overwhelming, whirling darkness," he said.

"As we set about the important work of writing our vision and responding to the prophetic call to thrive in love and service, the Eucharist is our unifying reminder that we belong to one another and are truly entirely interdependent," he said.

"God created our human hearts to love, to care, and to support our brothers and sisters, and that is how we will thrive," Gregory said.

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Before Gregory's keynote address, Cardinal-designate Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the U.S., spoke to the attendees. Pierre joked that, as a newly named cardinal, he, Gregory and Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl would form an association of cardinals in Washington and vote for Gregory as their president, drawing vigorous applause from the audience.

Pierre then read a message from Pope Francis that was signed by the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin. "His Holiness, likewise, encourages the commitment of America's Black Catholics, drawing inspiration from their faith to continue placing the rich diversity of their gifts and talents at the service of the Christian vision of truth, justice, and peace," he read.

The first Black Catholic Congress was held in Washington, D.C., in 1889. After the fifth Congress in Baltimore in 1894, no Congresses were held until 1987, when Congresses began to be held every five years. The 13th Congress was delayed one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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