News

Dorsonville Memorial Mass

Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, center, presides at a Feb. 2, 2024, memorial Mass for the late Bishop Mario E. Dorsonville at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Bethesda, Md., where then-Father Dorsonville once served. Concelebrants, from left to right, included: Washington Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjivar; Cardinal Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio; Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl, retired archbishop of Washington; and Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia. A former Washington auxiliary, Bishop Dorsonville had headed the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, La., for just under a year when he died unexpectedly Jan. 19. He was 63. (OSV News photo/Mihoko Owada, Catholic Standard)

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The recent passing of Bishop Mario Dorsonville, a former Washington auxiliary who had headed the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, for just under a year, has filled many with great sadness but also with much gratitude for his life and ministry.

Washington Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjivar said these words in his homily at a Feb. 2 memorial Mass for the late bishop at a Washington suburban Catholic church where he once served.

"We are filled with a great sense of sadness, but at the same time, our hearts are filled with gratitude for the many ways God showed his love, mercy and closeness through the life and fruitful ministry of our beloved bishop and friend Mario Dorsonville," he said.

Cardinal Wilton Gregory was the main celebrant at the Mass celebrated at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Bethesda, where Dorsonville served as a parochial vicar from 1997 to 2004 in his first assignment in the Archdiocese of Washington.

The concelebrants included Cardinal Donald Wuerl, retired archbishop of Washington; Cardinal Christophe Pierre, papal nuncio; Washington Auxiliary Bishops Roy E. Campbell Jr., Juan R. Esposito and Menjivar; and many area priests.

Dorsonville died unexpectedly late Jan. 19 due to complications related to liver disease discovered late last year. He was 63.

He was installed as the fifth bishop of Houma-Thibodaux March 29, 2023. Prior to that, he was an auxiliary bishop for the Archdiocese of Washington for eight years.

Born and educated in his native Colombia and ordained to the priesthood there in 1985, he came to the United States to study at The Catholic University of America in Washington, where he earned a doctorate in ministry in 1996.

In the Washington area, he served Catholics in international organizations and was a parochial vicar at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Bethesda from 1997 to 2004 and then at St. Mark the Evangelist Parish in Hyattsville from 2004-05. Dorsonville, who was incardinated as a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington in 1999, served as director of the Spanish Catholic Center from 2005-13 and as Catholic Charities' vice president for mission from 2013-15, when he was ordained as an auxiliary bishop of Washington.

A funeral Mass for Dorsonville was concelebrated by several archbishops and bishops from around the country Feb. 1 at St. Joseph's Co-Cathedral in Thibodaux, followed by burial on the grounds of the co-cathedral.

In his homily, Menjivar described the late bishop as a good and faithful servant, who felt very welcome in the United States and who put a lot of energy into the archdiocese's Walk with Mary procession and Mass honoring Our Lady of Guadalupe as the patroness of America.

Dorsonville established an annual procession and chose its name. "For him it was a walk of solidarity with the immigrants and an opportunity to evangelize. He was contagious with his enthusiasm," Menjivar said.

Menjivar recalled Dorsonville saying, "I was thirsty and I found someone who gave me to drink... I have seen so many thirsty faces that remind me of myself and in them I see Jesus," and he believes that mindset probably shaped the late bishop's concern and commitment to caring for those who have been forced to leave their homeland in search of a better and safer life.

He noted how the late bishop was a tireless advocate for Dreamers, immigrants who came to the United States with their families at a young age and who are seeking educational opportunities and a pathway to citizenship. Dorsonville, he said, saw those young people as the future of the church and the nation. The late bishop, he added, said that a refugee is a child of God and of the church and should be seen as God's smile to the world.

"No wonder he was chosen by the nation's bishops to be their leading voice on migration issues as chairman of the USCCB (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) Committee on Migration. And what a voice!" said Menjivar.

Dorsonville, he said, was not just a candle lit in the darkness but a torch that illuminated the way forward for people.

Menjivar explained that much of the late bishop's ministry centered on community outreach, advocacy and pastoral care to the poor and newcomers, especially from 2005-13 in his leadership of the archdiocese's Spanish Catholic Center.

"He struggled to keep these vital services active for the community. He loved the clients and most of all he loved the employees of Catholic Charities for whom he had tremendous respect, considered them his family and was always grateful," he said of the man who became that organization's vice president for mission.

Dorsonville built a strong network of donors and volunteers to support the Spanish Catholic Center, raising more than one-half million dollars a year for its outreach, and Menjivar joked that he was like Robin Hood in his fundraising. "He took from the rich to give to the poor."

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As an auxiliary bishop of Washington, Dorsonville directed the archdiocese's Office of Cultural Diversity and Outreach, leading efforts to recognize and celebrate the gifts, richness and importance of the diversity of the family of faith in the Archdiocese of Washington. He also enthusiastically promoted an initiative that provides financial support to Hispanic families for the education of their children in Catholic schools, said Menjivar, who has inherited these initiatives and asked people for their support in tribute to the late bishop.

He remembered his friend for his warm and radiant face, smiling with the love of Jesus, and as a compassionate and kind listener who made a difference in people's lives for the better, giving people the experience of being recognized and feeling loved.

"We now have in heaven a great friend who will continue to enrich our lives with his prayers before God and by seeking Mary's intercession," Menjivar said.

After the Mass, Celia Rivas, coordinator of immigration services at the Hispanic Catholic Center in Gaithersburg, Maryland, who worked closely with Dorsonville for two decades, recalled him as "a man of deep prayer and faith."

"Now it is our turn to pray for him to enjoy the gift of eternal life. Mission accomplished Monsignor! Thank you for bringing Christ to our needy," Rivas told El Pregonero, Washington's archdiocesan Spanish-language newspaper and website.

At Dorsonville's Feb. 1 funeral Mass in Louisiana, Cardinal Wuerl was the homilist and remembered the late prelate as "an energetic, witty and loving pastor, with a spontaneous laugh, a gentle disposition, attentive to the needs of others and a love for his vocation."

As Washington's archbishop he had ordained Dorsonville as an auxiliary bishop in the nation's capital in 2015.

Cardinal Gregory presided at the final commendation at the funeral Mass. He prayed, "Let us say goodbye to our brother and may our farewell express our affection for him, may it ease our sadness and strengthen our hope. ... Hear our prayers and open the gates of paradise to your servant, Bishop Mario, and help those of us who remain to comfort one another with the assurance of faith until we are all reunited in Christ and are with you and our brother forever."