Opinion
NCR Voices



Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego, California, speaks to Catholic News Service before taking possession of his titular church, St. Frumentius, in Rome April 23, 2023. Every cardinal is assigned a titular church in Rome, making him a member of the Rome clergy. (CNS/Chris Warde-Jones)



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The appointment of Cardinal Robert McElroy as the eighth archbishop of Washington, D.C., demonstrates the degree to which Pope Francis understands the situation of the church in the U.S. The pope found the man best suited to meet this moment both in the life of the church and the life of the nation.

To the capital of a deeply polarized nation, the pope has sent the only U.S. bishop who could be considered a scholar of American political history and its intersection with Catholic theology.

For a flavor of McElroy's unique combination of intellectual and pastoral depth, consider this speech he gave at a migration conference held in the weeks after Trump's victory in 2016. He said that "there is a profound sickness in the soul in American political life. This sickness tears at the fabric of our nation's unity, undermining the core democratic consensus that is the foundation for our identity as Americans."

The "profound sickness" was not Trumpism — or Clintonism for that matter. McElroy was keen to note in 2016 that Democrats could find no warrant in Catholic teaching for trying to make the new administration a failure, as some Republicans had done to President Barack Obama. The sickness was creeping, excessive partisanship: "Party choice has ceased to be merely a political category and instead has become a wider form of personal identity. This often has searing negative impacts within families, friendships and civic life, as citizens increasingly confine themselves within partisan media and culture silos, and are encouraged in their anger against those who disagree."

On migration, McElroy was emphatic. "For us, as the Catholic community of the United States, it is unthinkable that we will stand by while more than ten percent of our flock is ripped from our midst and deported," he said. "It is equally unthinkable that we as Church will witness the destruction of our historic national outreach to refugees at a time when the need to offer safe haven to refugees is growing

throughout the world."

Now, since winning the election two months ago, Trump and his allies have made clear their intent to adopt draconian immigration policies, threatening mass deportations. McElroy's pastoral experience at the border will inform his dealings with Congress, the administration and the broader public in important ways on this issue. He can speak with authority on the gifts migrants bring as well as the sufferings caused by our broken immigration system.

Related: Pope Francis taps Cardinal McElroy as Washington's new archbishop

McElroy's thinking about politics goes deeper than any particular issue. His 1989 book *The Search for an American Public Theology: The Contribution of John Courtney Murray* is an excellent introduction to the social ethics of that most prominent American theologian of the 20th century.

Murray and the U.S. bishops at the Second Vatican Council had been critical to the drafting and adoption of the Decree of Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*. That decree marked a significant development in the church's teaching on its relationship with civil authority.

Dignitatis Humanae taught that all persons have a right to religious freedom, a freedom rooted in our Christian anthropology: Rights inhere in persons, not propositions, and flow from human dignity. This teaching effectively ended the charge often leveled at Catholics that we suffered uniquely from a dual loyalty, to the pope and the nation. Catholics, like all persons, owe loyalty to their conscience and the country, and when those loyalties collide, no person should be punished by any government for refusing to violate their conscience.

Our Constitution was built on ideas about human freedom that derived from different sources than Catholic anthropology, but the church's teaching and our constitutional framework were, at long last, no longer seen as antagonistic. A good Catholic can be a good citizen of a democracy, like ours, in which no religion has priority of place.

At a time when no one knows what challenges to the constitutional order will be forthcoming from the second Trump administration, Pope Francis has selected the one bishop who can confront any such challenges without having to call an expert or group of experts for advice, and then evaluate the quality or biases of the advice he

received. McElroy has thought deeply about issues of church and state his entire adult life. A deeply dialogical person, McElroy will undoubtedly consult many people as he continues to refine his ideas, but he brings as much expertise as anyone he might call.

McElroy also exemplifies Pope Francis' call for a more pastoral theology and a more synodal church. In 2016, one year after taking the helm of the Diocese of San Diego, McElroy convoked a synod on families, the first of four such diocesan synods. He has championed and participated in the global synod in Rome held in 2023 and 2024, and proposed the creation of a task force at the U.S. bishops' conference to advance synodality throughout the U.S. church.



Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego speaks about his experience as a delegate to the Synod of Bishops on synodality in October 2023 at the Vatican during a talk Feb. 16, 2024, at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress in Anaheim, California. (OSV News/Courtesy Archdiocese of LA Digital Team)

Today's appointment will be welcomed by those who advocate for church reform. McElroy has been clear that he thinks the church should welcome women into all ministries where it is doctrinally permitted. He has called for a more welcoming attitude towards Catholics who are LGBT. But there will be friction here too. As we witnessed in the responses to the Vatican's document *Dignitas Infinita*, some activists think that unless you agree with their arguments, you are not really being welcoming. Like the pope, the new cardinal-archbishop of Washington is prepared to be welcoming but is not prepared to toss out the church's theological anthropology in favor of the autonomy-centered anthropology at the root of much contemporary thinking about human sexuality and gender.

When McElroy was named a cardinal in 2022, I said he was "America's Newman." Like St. John Henry Newman, McElroy's selection as a cardinal was a surprise, the first U.S. cardinal who was not leading a major archdiocese. Just as the English cardinal was the leading intellectual of the English church, McElroy is the leading intellectual of the U.S. church.

More than anything, however, it is McElroy's gifts as a preacher that most define his resemblance to Newman. The day after he became a cardinal, McElroy offered a Mass of thanksgiving in San Patricio, the American parish in Rome. Without notes, he preached a profound sermon about the relationship of fears and facades to the commitment of faith as discussed in the movie "Of Gods and Men," and he offered a proper Christian idea of humility. It is every bit a match for Newman's famous sermon "The Second Spring," on the reestablishment of the Catholic hierarchy in Great Britain in 1852.

There are some firsts in this appointment. This is the first time someone who is already a cardinal has been transferred to Washington. McElroy is the first archbishop of Washington to have attended a non-Catholic college, Harvard, and only the second to attend a non-Catholic graduate school, Stanford. The first archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle, studied at the New York School of Social Work. McElroy is the first archbishop of Washington to come from the West Coast.

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Most remarkable of all, Washington, D.C., will now be home to four cardinals: Cardinals Donald Wuerl, Wilton Gregory, the two emeriti, Christophe Pierre, the apostolic nuncio, and now McElroy. Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the retired archbishop of Boston, has indicated he intends to spend about half his time at the Capuchin College in D.C., which will make for a fifth cardinal in D.C. Not since Napoleon gathered the cardinals in France during his reign as emperor have so many cardinals lived in one city outside Rome. Might this portend a Waterloo in someone's future?

How one wishes the late Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco, whom McElroy served as priest secretary and later vicar general, was here to see this day! Quinn was one of the leading intellectuals among the bishops in his day too. His book *Revered and Reviled: A Re-Examination of Vatican Council I*, which I reviewed here, is one of the best treatments of that controversial council. Like McElroy, Quinn recognized early that the U.S. church needed profound reform in order to fulfill its mission in the modern age and to fully implement the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

In his new post, McElroy will have an unparalleled pulpit to address the challenges of our time, bringing the promise of the Gospel to those challenges. This most articulate defender of Catholic social teaching will be living up the street from Trump, able to challenge all the myriad threats the new president brings to human dignity and decency, and to call out the Democrats when they advocate policies that affront that dignity too.

Today is a great and momentous day for the Archdiocese of Washington and for the entire church in the U.S.