News
Analysis



Then-San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy speaks before a listening session with the public about clergy sexual abuse, Oct. 1, 2018, at Our Mother of Confidence Parish Hall in San Diego. On Jan. 17, 2025, NCR interviewed McElroy about his meetings with Richard Sipe in 2016. (CNS/David Maung)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

View Author Profile
cbarone@ncronline.org

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 10, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

One year into his tenure as San Diego's bishop in 2016, Cardinal Robert McElroy was asked to meet with a resident of his Southern California diocese to discuss grave matters regarding the ongoing clergy sexual abuse crisis.

McElroy, the incoming archbishop of Washington, D.C. who will be installed March 11, said in an NCR interview that he had a constructive initial meeting nine years ago with Richard Sipe, a former Benedictine priest, researcher and psychotherapist, and a well-known voice in the Catholic world in support of survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

However, the discussions took a strange turn at a second meeting, McElroy said, when Sipe began making hearsay claims without providing verifiable evidence, including about now-former cardinal and retired archbishop of Washington, D.C., Theodore McCarrick.

Afterwards, Sipe began behaving in an unorthodox manner. McElroy said that Sipe delivered an allegation-filled letter through a process server who falsely impersonated a donor. The subterfuge made "further conversations at a level of trust impossible," McElroy said in an August 2018 statement, after Sipe's death, about his conversations with him.



Richard Sipe in 2006 (Newscom/ZUMA Press/John Gastaldo)

Sipe died of multiple organ failure on Aug. 8, 2018, at the age of 85. Sipe's family members did not respond to attempts to seek a request to comment for this story.

McElroy's past exchanges with Sipe have come under renewed scrutiny as conservative commentators have raised the episode to criticize his appointment as the new archbishop in the nation's capital.

A National Catholic Reporter review of the facts and documents available regarding the Sipe episode show that McElroy appears to have taken every reasonable step to pursue the unsubstantiated allegations.

In one of his first extensive interviews since Pope Francis appointed McElroy to be archbishop of Washington, the cardinal said:

- He repeatedly requested corroborating evidence before escalating Sipe's claims that Sipe himself admitted were lacking.

- He declined to pass along unsubstantiated hearsay allegations, particularly after Sipe told him he planned to share his concerns with the nuncio in Washington, D.C.
- He said he was bound by the need for verified information. If he had concrete evidence, he would have taken it to the nuncio.
- He lost trust in Sipe after the impersonating process server tactic.

Sipe later published the letter on his website, which remains active today and is often linked to by conservative detractors of McElroy. In the letter, Sipe accused McElroy of not cooperating with him on the issue. The letter also contained accusations against McCarrick. McElroy mentioned the letter in his statement on Sipe's death.

Typical of the drumbeat of criticism is a post on social media from The Washington Post and Fox News columnist Marc Thiessen, who wrote on X:  "Cardinal McElroy as archbishop of Washington is an insult to all Catholics in the DMV," short for the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia. "He was warned about Theodore McCarrick's predations — in a 14 page letter delivered by a process server — and did nothing. For him to now assume the same seat is a disgrace."

> Cardinal McElroy as archbishop of Washington is an insult to all Catholics in the DMV. He was warned about Theodore McCarrick’s predations — in a 14 page letter delivered by process server — and did nothing. For him to now assume the same seat is a disgrace.
>
> Details here:… https://t.co/kG4BzJukKa
>
> — Marc Thiessen □□□❤□□□□□□□□□□ (@marcthiessen) January 6, 2025

But supporters of McElroy say reading the letter now on the website lacks context. The defenders also say the critics are using a breakdown in communications with a man who has been dead for more than six years as a front for their true complaints — that McElroy is a progressive whose pastoral approach embraces inclusion and synodality. And those Catholic critics bristle because the cardinal is an effective and outspoken defender of Pope Francis, whom many traditionalists dislike.

In addition, a legal and ethical specialist consulted for this article said that relying on hearsay evidence not only would have undermined the legal processes, but would have been morally problematic.



Now-former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, attends Mass at St. Peter Claver Church in Baltimore on Nov. 14, 2016, during the annual fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"It got around to specific individuals that were speculative, that he didn't have reason to level accusations, but he just felt they were suspicious individuals," McElroy said in a Jan. 17  interview with NCR, in his most extensive comments on the episode to date. Among the names Sipe had mentioned was McCarrick.

## McElroy-Sipe timeline

**March 2015:** Robert McElroy is appointed as bishop of San Diego.

**Early 2016:** McElroy, one year into his appointment as bishop of San Diego, holds two meetings with Richard Sipe.

**First meeting (2016):** Described by McElroy as "very positive and substantive," focusing on the Catholic Church's struggles with abuse and insights from Sipe's years of work with survivors.

**Second meeting (2016):** The tone shifts as Sipe begins making hearsay claims without firm evidence, straining the initial collaborative spirit. Sipes' claims include the former archbishop of Washington, D.C., now-former cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

**July 2016:** Sipe requests a third meeting. McElroy declines, citing concerns over the lack of corroboration for some of Sipe's conclusions.

**July 19, 2016:** Sipe delivers a letter to McElroy through a process server who falsely impersonates a donor. The letter accuses McElroy of no longer responding to Sipe's requests for further meetings and cooperation, and contains accusations against McCarrick.

**July 2016:** McElroy calls Sipe back, urging him to provide any corroboration that might help the Vatican take action. Sipe declines, saying he was precluded from sharing certain evidence, but does not say why. Sipe informs McElroy that he plans to send the information to the papal nuncio in Washington and the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

**July 28, 2016:** Sipe publishes the letter on his website.

**June 2018:** The world learns about McCarrick's abuse allegations, after the Holy See removes McCarrick from public ministry. A review board of the Archdiocese of New York determines that an allegation of sexual abuse involving a 16-year-old altar boy is "credible and substantiated."

**July 2018:** The New York Times publishes a story exposing the pattern of sexual abuse involving adult seminarians.

**Aug. 8, 2018:** Richard Sipe dies.

**August 2018:** McElroy issues a statement after Sipe's death, dated Aug. 8 on the San Diego Diocese's website. He commemorates Sipe's contribution to the support

of sexual abuse survivors. McElroy describes Sipe's delivery of the letter to McElroy's assistant, via a process server who impersonated a donor. McElroy says he wrote to Sipe and told him that "his decision to engage a process server who operated under false pretenses, and his decision to copy his letter to me to a wide audience, made further conversations at a level of trust impossible."

**February 2019:** Pope Francis confirms the dismissal of former cardinal Theodore McCarrick from the clerical state following a church investigation.

**Aug. 27, 2022:** Pope Francis elevates McElroy to the rank of cardinal.

**Jan. 6, 2025:** Pope Francis appoints McElroy as new archbishop of Washington, D.C.

**March 11, 2025:** McElroy will begin his term as new archbishop of Washington, D.C.

There were multiple unofficial reports to bishops and the Vatican about McCarrick's alleged misconduct between 1993 and 2016, but it was not until June 2018 that the world learned about his abuse allegations. That's when the Holy See removed McCarrick from public ministry, after a review board of the Archdiocese of New York determined that an allegation of sexual abuse involving a 16-year-old altar boy was "credible and substantiated."

In July 2018, The New York Times published a story exposing the pattern of sexual abuse involving adult seminarians.

At the time that McElroy and Sipe met, McElroy was serving as bishop of San Diego and McCarrick was retired, living a continent away in Washington, D.C. While Sipe was in the San Diego Diocese, none of the allegations occurred in California and Sipe provided only unsubstantiated information to McElroy.

Sipe, who died less than a month after the July Times story was published, had said in that story that seminarians had confided in him about McCarrick's abuses as early as the 1980s, and that he had written to Pope Benedict XVI in 2008, stating that the former cardinal's abuses had been "widely known for several decades."

Still, McElroy initially had good reason to meet with Sipe. As a researcher, Sipe had credibility. In the 1980s, Sipe's research into sex and celibacy determined that at least six out of every 100 Catholic priests were sexual abusers of children. Sipe

presented his findings to the U.S. bishops in 1986 but was initially dismissed and discounted.

Later, Sipe's work gained prominence when the Boston Globe exposed the Boston Archdiocese priest sexual abuse scandal in the early 2000s. His insights, dramatized in the film "Spotlight," explained the church's clandestine practices and how clerical predators dodged accountability.

His warnings gained attention as new allegations came to light about prominent figures, such as McCarrick, who had become a staple on political shows and frequented the salons of Washington.

In February 2019, McCarrick was dismissed from the priesthood after a church investigation found him guilty of "solicitation in the sacrament of confession and sins against the Sixth Commandment with minors and with adults, with the aggravating factor of the abuse of power."

In the meetings with Sipe, McElroy said, he asked for corroboration. "I said, if it's going to go to the nuncio, is there anything you have that can bolster that, that will help the nuncio take action on this? And he said he was precluded from certain confidences. And I think he meant legal, legally precluded," McElroy said.

Discussions became problematic, McElroy said, when Sipe began making allegations against those names without sufficient evidence to back them up. When Sipe requested a third meeting, McElroy declined, citing concerns over the lack of corroboration for some of Sipe's conclusions.

Boston College professor Cathleen Kaveny, who studies the relationship of law, religion, and morality, defended McElroy's response to Sipe's allegations. "Much of what Sipe gave to McElroy is classifiable as hearsay, and anonymous hearsay to boot," she said to NCR. "Sipe was reporting what a third party said or experienced, not his own words or experience."

"Hearsay is legally problematic — it's often not admissible in a court of law. But it is also morally problematic, because it doesn't help us get to the bottom of a situation by listening to the people who know best: the people who were actually there," she said.



Cathleen Kaveny, a law and theology professor at Boston College (Courtesy of Cathleen Kaveny)

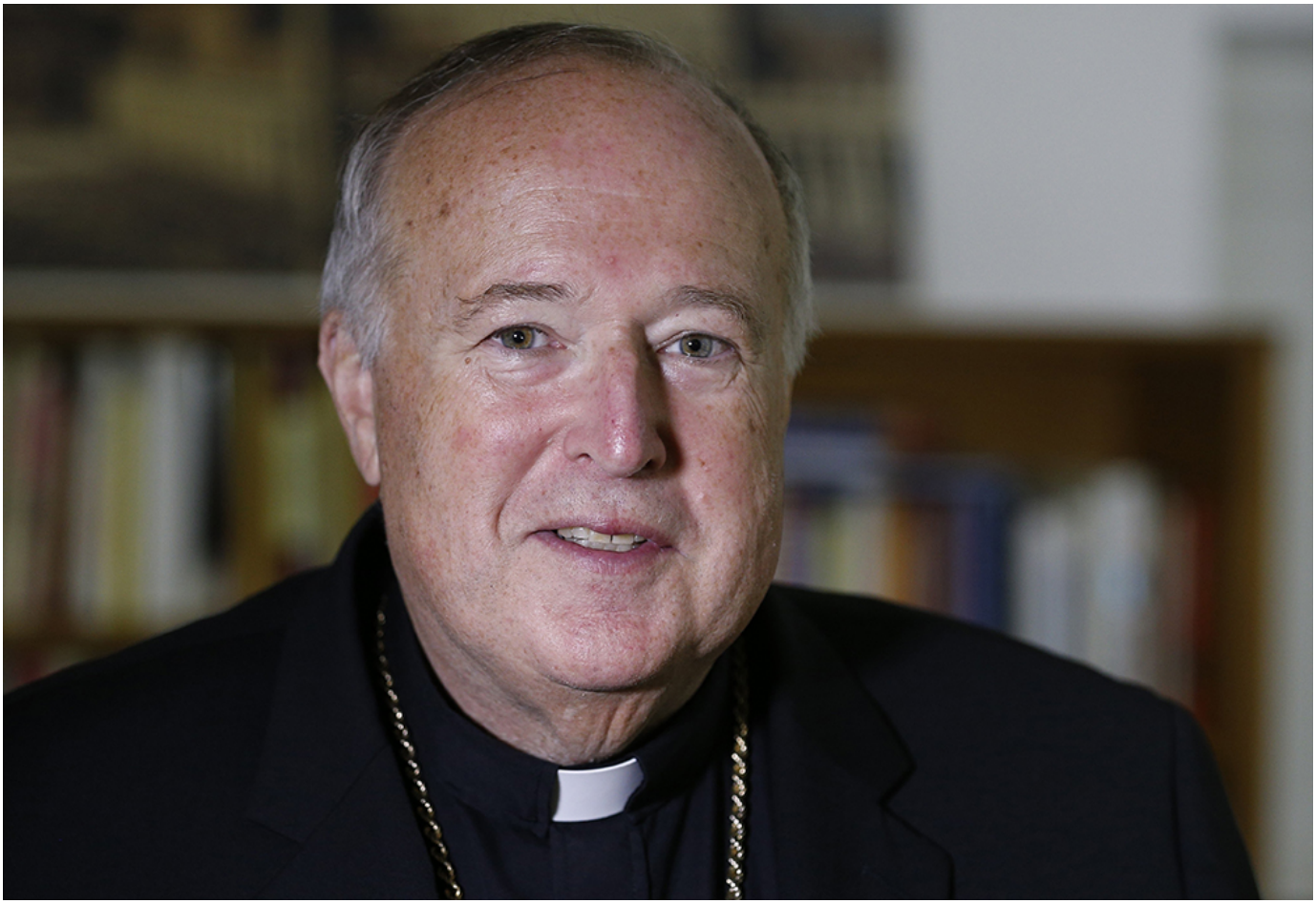
After reading the letter delivered by the masquerading donor-process server, McElroy called Sipe and urged him to provide any substantiation that might help the Vatican take action.

Sipe declined, McElroy said. He said he was precluded from sharing certain evidence. He did not say why. McElroy said he thought the reason might be that it had been obtained through lawsuits.

Despite these limitations, Sipe informed McElroy that he planned to send the information to the papal nuncio in Washington, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, and the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. Sipe's website, which is still active today, states that he did that.

"I want to be really clear," McElroy said. "When he was talking about sexual abuse by McCarrick with me, at least in that conversation, it was with adults. He never

mentioned or insinuated or hinted or anything else that he had reason to believe there was sexual activity with minors."



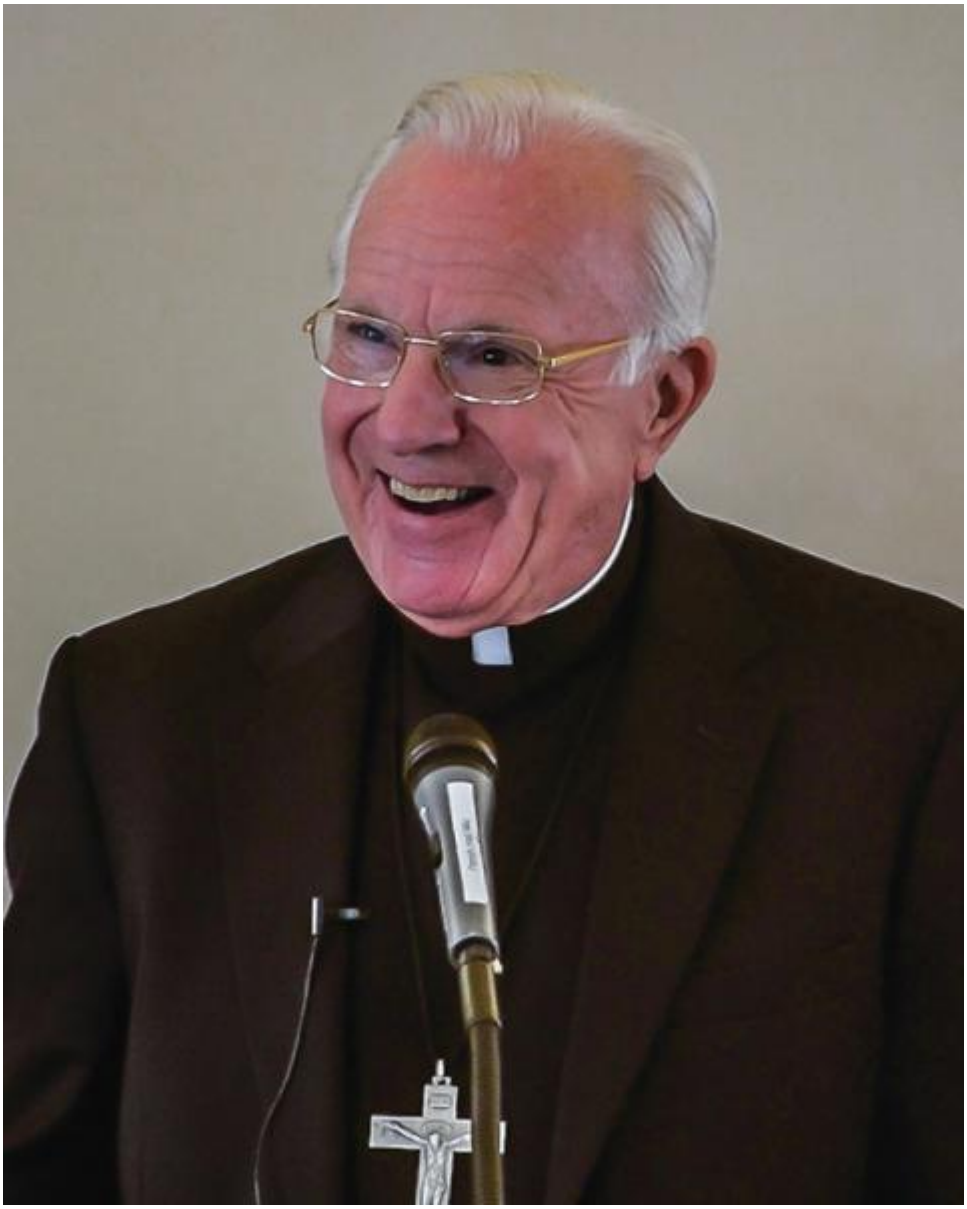
Cardinal Robert McElroy is pictured in a 2019 photo. Pope Francis appointed Cardinal McElroy as the next archbishop of Washington in an announcement publicized Jan. 6, 2025. (OSV News/Catholic News Service/Paul Haring)

McElroy said that he had asked Sipe for additional supporting materials to strengthen the case but noted that Sipe had already decided to forward the allegations to the appropriate authorities.

"Ordinarily, the one I would forward it to was the nuncio," McElroy said.

McElroy said he doesn't know whether the nuncio or other Vatican officials responded to Sipe's letter in 2016.

"He had talked about with me that he was going to send this information to the nunciature and to the Pontifical Commission on Minors," he said, adding that Sipe's website later confirmed he had forwarded the allegations.



Retired Bishop Robert Brom of San Diego is seen in this 2015 photo. Bishop Brom, who retired in 2013, died May 9, 2022, at age 83. (CNS/Courtesy of Faith in Marketing/Thom Hiatt)

McElroy also said that Sipe told him that his primary reason for approaching McElroy that day in 2016 was to raise awareness about an allegation involving former Bishop Robert Brom of San Diego. "That's why he came to me. It was not over McCarrick that he came to me," McElroy said. "He wanted me to be aware of an allegation that had been made against former Bishop Brom."

Brom, who died in 2022, was bishop of San Diego from 1990 to 2013. He was accused of  coercing a seminarian into having sex in the 1980s when he was bishop

of Duluth, Minnesota. The bishop denied the charges and the former seminarian retracted them after reaching a settlement with the diocese.

After reviewing the documentation on Brom's case, McElroy said that the nunciature was already aware of it.

Despite the challenges inherent in these discussions, McElroy acknowledged Sipe's broader concerns.

"He just wanted me to know his view on the whole array of moral failures by priests, which he felt was related to moral failures by bishops who were compromised," McElroy said. "That was his goal, I believe, in talking."



Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory and Cardinal Robert McElroy leave a Jan. 6, 2025, news conference at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington. That morning, Pope Francis accepted the resignation of Gregory, Washington's archbishop since 2019, and named McElroy of San Diego as his successor. McElroy will be installed March 11. (OSV News photo/Archdiocese of Washington/Geoffrey Ros)

"Basically, the conservative critics and the opponents of Pope Francis see the sexual abuse crisis as another weapon for their culture war," said David Gibson, director of the Center on Religion and Culture at Fordham University. "They are less interested in the victims and in reforms than they are in scoring points."

"This is also a Catholic media story and a right-wing media story. There are no responsible journalists raising this as an issue, because there's nothing there," he said.

Gibson, a former reporter with Religion News Service, who interacted with Sipe extensively over the years, described him as both insightful and eccentric. "Richard Sipe had made a lot of good points, but he was also like one of those eccentric people who writes letters to the editor every day," he said. He noted that Sipe often claimed to have evidence and testimony against McCarrick but never shared actionable documentation.

"He talked to journalists, right and left and center," during the '90s, Gibson said. "None of them ever were able to do anything about McCarrick."



David Gibson, director of Fordham University's Center on Religion and Culture, is seen in this March 26, 2019, file photo. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Gibson specifically addressed attempts to link McElroy, a prominent ally of Pope Francis, to the scandal surrounding McCarrick. He described these efforts as "patently absurd" and without merit.

"McElroy is seen as a protégé of Pope Francis, so they've been trying to hang McCarrick around Francis' neck and around the neck of anybody who is remotely aligned with Francis' vision of the church," Gibson explained.

Regarding the accusations that McElroy failed to act on information provided by Sipe about McCarrick, Gibson was dismissive. "There's no story. McCarrick had been retired for years. There was no evidence. Sipe provided no evidence," he said. Gibson also stressed the implausibility of holding McElroy, the bishop of a diocese thousands of miles from McCarrick's jurisdiction, accountable for addressing decades-old misconduct.

"If you blew the whistle on every allegation, on every rumor that comes across your desk, you would be sued every day for defamation and slander," he said, adding that McElroy "did everything he could possibly do."



Then-San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy gives an opening address at a public gathering Oct. 1, 2018, at Our Mother of Confidence Parish Hall in San Diego. McElroy conducted the first of eight sessions throughout the diocese to listen to the public about the issue of clergy sexual abuse. More than 300 people participated in the session.(CNS/David Maung)

In October 2018, Times of San Diego reported that McElroy also faced a heated audience at his first "listening session" on pedophile priests in the diocese of San Diego, where he sought to reassure over 300 Catholics that the San Diego diocese had moved beyond its history of abuse. McElroy emphasized that no credible allegations had been made against living priests since 2002 and defended Pope Francis against claims of cover-ups.

In that context, some conservative San Diego Catholics challenged him on the church's handling of past scandals, the role of homosexuality in the clergy, and his interaction with Sipe.

McElroy pushed back against allegations that he was aware of McCarrick's abuses, refuting claims made in a letter by Carlo Maria Viganò, former Vatican ambassador to the U.S., who became a spiritual leader of some conservative critics of Francis. McElroy defined the letter as an "attack on Pope Francis" and "ideologically charged."

Advertisement

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, a senior analyst on the church issues whose commentary regularly appears in NCR, said that just because someone suspects cases of abuse does not mean that there is evidence to prove them.

"My own experience was, over the years, I've received phone calls from reporters trying to get to the bottom of these rumors, and they never could, because no one was willing to go public," Reese said.

"And that's the tragedy of these abuse cases, that we have to empower victims and protect victims, whether they're adults or minors, so that they can come forward and have justice," he said. "I think the proper authorities would immediately ask for the victims to come forward, to testify. Any court of law has troubles dealing with hearsay evidence, and that's why it's important to empower people so that they can come forward."

Regarding his new role as archbishop of Washington, D.C., McElroy said he must first understand the archdiocese's history and legal landscape before addressing his expectations and concerns on sexual abuses.

"I have to come to know the diocese as a whole, first of all, pastorally, and one of those elements is I have to come to know the past issues of sexual abuse that have occurred, and the steps that have been taken over these past 25 years, and what the current status of things are there," he said.

Cardinal Robert W. McElroy, left, and Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, the retiring archbishop of W

Cardinal Robert W. McElroy, left, and Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, the retiring archbishop of Washington, dispense ashes during Ash Wednesday Mass March 5, 2025, at the St. Matthew the Apostle Cathedral in Washington. (OSV News/Mihoko Owada, Catholic Standard)