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Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, right, the retiring archbishop of Washington, dispenses ashes to C

Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, right, the retiring archbishop of Washington, dispenses ashes to Cardinal Robert W. McElroy, during Ash Wednesday Mass March 5, 2025, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington. Cardinal McElroy will be installed March 11 as the eighth archbishop of Washington. (OSV News/Mihoko Owada, Catholic Standard)

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Less than a week before he will be officially installed as the eighth archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Robert W. McElroy celebrated Ash Wednesday Mass March 5 at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington.

He urged the members of his new flock to "let God into the areas of our lives where we find it difficult to do so."

"Jesus calls us to deeper conversion during this period of time, and I think for most of us the great dilemma we face is not whether we open ourselves to God, but rather whether we reserve parts of our lives where we do not let God in," he said. "That is really what the core of Lent is all about -- giving our whole hearts to God."

Cardinal McElroy was the principal celebrant and homilist and distributed ashes during the midday Mass. It was his first public Mass in the archdiocese since Pope Francis appointed him Jan. 6 to succeed the retiring archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory. Cardinal McElroy will be installed March 11.

Cardinal Gregory, now the Washington Archdiocese's apostolic administrator, concelebrated the liturgy.

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Addressing "my dear sisters and brothers," Cardinal McElroy reminded the faithful that Christ accompanies them on their Lenten journey, "seeking deeper conversion of our hearts and souls."

He acknowledged that while "each of us finds it too difficult in certain areas of our lives to fully conform to God's grace, we truly try and strive to do that, and Lent is the time when we should redouble our efforts to do that."

"Lent is the time to also understand that in our failures in life, when we have striven to the best of our abilities, it is Christ who stands by our sides, who consoles us, and lifts us up in our failures and helps us understand the Lord is never closer to us than when we have tried and we have failed, and it is God's grace that makes us whole," Cardinal McElroy said.

People pray during Ash Wednesday Mass March 5, 2025, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the A

People pray during Ash Wednesday Mass iin 2025 at the St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington. (OSV News/Mihoko Owada, Catholic Standard)

About 1,000 people packed the cathedral, joining with fellow Catholics around the world to receive ashes, marking the start of Lent and the beginning of their spiritual preparations for Easter.

"God only asks us that we do the best we can in the circumstances in which we find ourselves -- and sometimes people live in terribly complex and excruciating circumstances," Cardinal McElroy told those who attended the Mass. "We try to do the best we can in the circumstances we find ourselves."

He also said that while the faithful "try to come more fully to conversion to God," they may sometimes fail to do so.

"We understand that underneath that all is God's abiding grace that walks with us, transforms us, lifts us up, calls us to ever greater closeness, and understanding that God has called us to greatness -- but walks with us even when we do not achieve it."

At the end of the Mass, Cardinal McElroy led the congregation in reciting a decade of the rosary for the intentions of the Holy Father "for his healing and that his suffering be eased in these days... (and) that God may be with his servant Francis these days."

Prior to departing the altar to process to the back of the church where he and Cardinal Gregory greeted people as they departed the cathedral, Cardinal McElroy wished everyone "a wonderful, prayerful Lent."

This story appears in the **Lent 2025** feature series. View the full series.