News



Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy gives the homily at his installation Mass March 11 at the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)



by Rhina Guidos

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Washington's new archbishop wasted no time addressing the divisions that exist in his new archdiocese as well as the church's past sins in dealing with sexual abuse of minors.

During his homily at his March 11 installation Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Cardinal Robert McElroy spoke about some of the tensions that often begin in Washington's institutions and radiate to the rest of the country and stressed instead that God wishes dignity and hope for humanity.

"How deeply that contrasts with the world that we have made," he said. "Divisions of race, gender, ideology and nationality, flourish in the world of politics, religion, family life and education. The poor and the migrant are daily dispossessed, and the dignity of the unborn is denied."

He addressed a shrine packed with a cross section of the archdiocese — from the District of Columbia, the country's seat of the government, and five Maryland counties — sprinkled with prominent Catholics from the political right and left. Among them: the former Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, U.S. Rep. Anna Eshoo, Democrat of California, Callista Gingrich, who became U.S. ambassador to the Holy See during Donald Trump's first term, Michael Steele, former chair of the Republican National Committee and Mark Shriver, former member of the Maryland House of Delegates.

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Overhead view during installation Mass March 11 of Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy at the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

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A woman prays before the installation Mass March 11 of Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy at the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

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A person in the congregation takes a photo during the installation Mass March 11 of Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy at the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

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Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy acknowledges some of those in the congregation as he walks past pews in the opening procession of his installation Mass March 11 at the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

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Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy in the opening procession of his installation Mass March 11 at the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

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  Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy uses incense during Eucharistic prayers during his installation Mass March 11 at the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

He called on the church in Washington to reject seeing those we disagree with as enemies and offer the world the vision God offers: to see others as "beloved children, brothers and sisters."

The local church in Washington is like the battlefield Pope Francis describes in his analogy of a field hospital, one where "all of us are wounded, all of us are in pain, all of us sinners in need of mercy and forgiveness," McElroy said, adding "that the church sins, and is in need of healing, especially in failure of protecting the young from sexual abuse."

It's an experience the archdiocese knows well as its former archbishop, Theodore McCarrick, was laicized in 2019 following credible accusations that he sexually abused minors and engaged in sexual misconduct with male seminarians before arriving in Washington. Cardinal Wilton Gregory, McElroy's predecessor, participated

in the creation of a set of norms to help the church handle sexual abuse allegations, known as the Dallas Charter, but McCarrick's shadow still looms.

Outside the basilica, a group of about 12 women and men, who have voiced opposition to McElroy and others in the church, protested. Most Mass-goers walked past them quietly.

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A group of protestors gather outside the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception prior to Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy's installation Mass March 11. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

McElroy, 71, steps into an angst-filled archdiocese of more than 667,000, where Catholics have been among the estimated 100,000 federal workers who have taken a buyout or been fired since President Donald Trump allowed billionaire Elon Musk to slash the government's workforce in February. More cuts are expected.

Parish halls in the archdiocese have been filled with those trying to help some of the unemployed revamp their resumes or cope with the anxiety and stress that job and income loss has produced. But they've also welcomed migrants and their families, scared of the government's deportation threats, trying to find out information about their rights.

Many of the archdiocese's Catholic communities "are worried about their parishioners," said Darlene Jackson after Mass March 9 at St. Augustine Catholic Church, billed as the "Mother Church of Black Catholics" in Washington.

"Challenges around federal employment and immigration are two big issues" the archdiocesan population is facing, Jackson told the National Catholic Reporter. Referring to Washington's new archbishop, two days before his installation, she said: "I know he has a great background in working with immigrants and just [in] church inclusivity as a whole. So, I hope that remains the case here in Washington."

Congregation at McElroy installation

Attendees listen to the homily at the installation of Cardinal Robert McElroy as archbishop of Washington. (NCR/James V. Grimaldi)

It may prove to be a challenge with a president who, in his first day in office, said inclusion programs were "discriminatory," and whose U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia recently threatened Georgetown University Law School, a private Catholic institution, saying it would not hire its students unless the school ditched its inclusion programs.

On a good day, anyone who takes up the mantle of archbishop of Washington, close to the seat of world power, walks "a tightrope," said Jackson.

But perhaps one of his last acts as San Diego archbishop, McElroy's last post, may provide a glimpse of what's to expect from the cardinal.

St. Joseph Sr. Suzanne Jabro, who works with migrants and refugees in Southern California through her Border Compassion ministry, told NCR she won't forget how the cardinal rallied and lifted the spirits of the Catholic community Feb. 9 in San Diego. As about 1,200 gathered at St. Joseph Cathedral, some feeling fear, sadness or helplessness over deportation threats, McElroy made his message to Catholics clear: "We cannot stand silent."

"It was so moving," she said. "You go to something and your soul is fed with real food. I said 'this is where I need to be.' "

McElroy carries with him labels that can be taken as good or bad, depending on the personal political prism Catholics use: progressive, defender, smart, vocal, provocative.

But there's a simpler word for him, said Fr. Bernardo Lara, who worked with the prelate during his 10 years in San Diego.

"He's very sincere," he told NCR on March 7. "And it's founded in the Gospel. It's against human injustice and in the support of humanity based on the Gospel. He has to preach the Gospel, no?"



After a March 9 Mass at St. Augustine Parish in Washington, D.C., Darlene Jackson said Catholics in the District of Columbia look forward to supporting new Washington Archbishop Robert McElroy in the church’s mission. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

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>
> — Fr. Bernardo Lara
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McElroy doesn't preach the word of God by quoting biblical verses but by Christianity's trademark custom of leaving no one behind, expanding the circle of the community by bringing in those at the margins of society and trying to integrate them, Lara said.

Besides migrants and the poor, he's also known for his defense of LGBTQ+ communities, but he also has criticized the "poison" of division that has "entered destructively into the life of the church." A "false divide" separates pro-life communities from justice and peace communities, "Pope Francis Catholics" and "St. John Paul II Catholics," he has written.

Inside an episode some conservatives use to bash Cardinal McElroy, and why they're wrong

Lara said McElroy has been like a father, an example for pastors for how to tend to increasingly diverse flocks, but his new post is one that goes beyond the boundaries of a diocese, Lara said.

"It's bittersweet," Lara said. "It always was a blessing to have had him [in San Diego] and obviously, it hurts. … But, at the same time, we know he will have a voice that will resound a little stronger and one we want to resound in favor of building a more fraternal world, where there's a seat at the table for the poor, and for those on the margins."