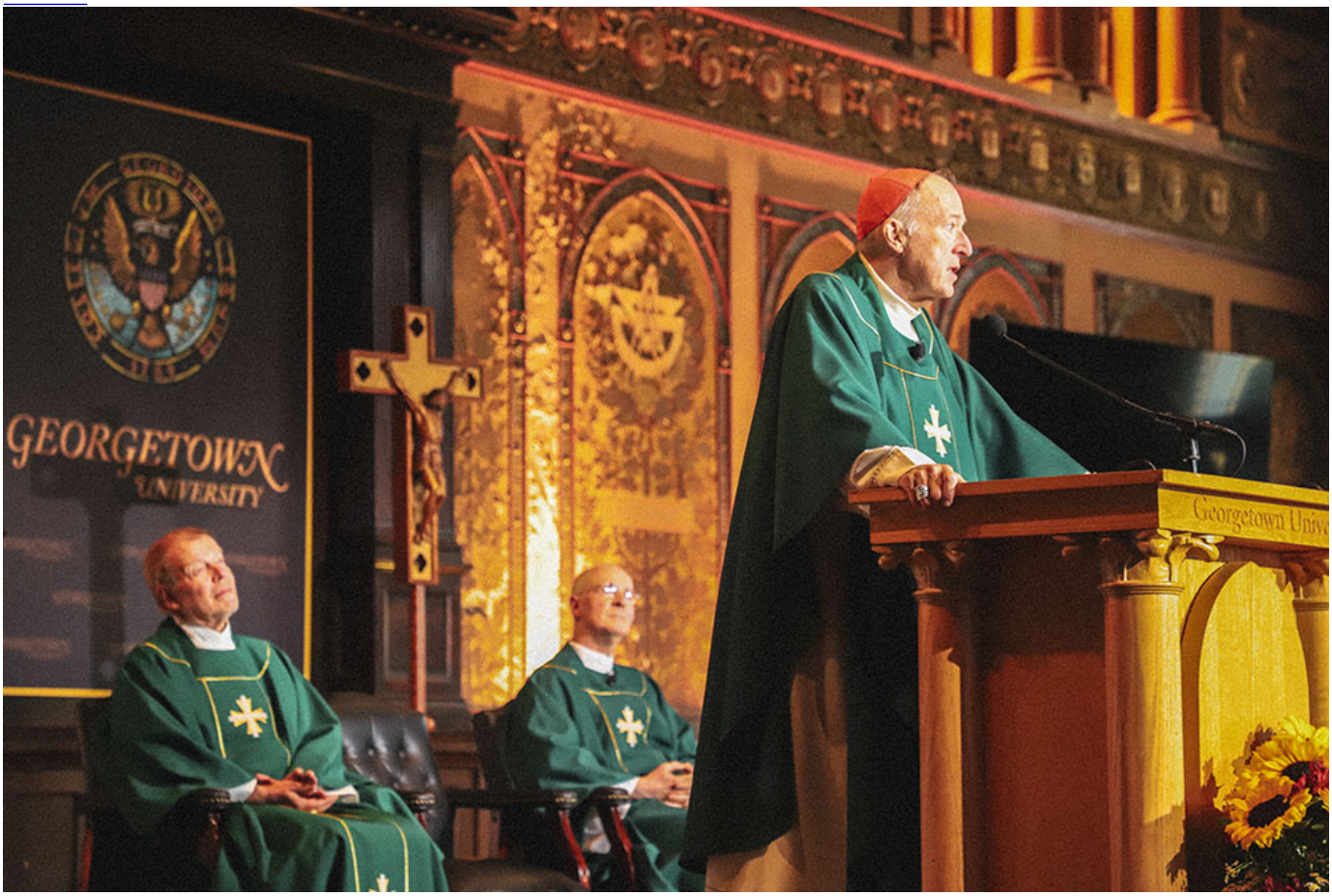
News



Washington Cardinal Robert McElroy presides at Mass during the Outreach conference June 20, 2026, in Gaston Hall at Georgetown University. (Courtesy of Outreach and America Media/Kevin Christopher Robles)



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The still-emerging papacy of Pope Leo XIV offers signs of "great hope" for the church's ministry to LBGTQ Catholics, said Cardinal Robert McElroy at a conference to mark five years of the Outreach ministry founded by Jesuit Fr. James Martin.

During his homily June 20 at Mass at Georgetown University, the archbishop of Washington pointed both to Leo's deemphasis on sexual morality and to a Vatican report's recommendation of a more pastoral approach to people of faith with same-sex attractions.

"In a church which has so frequently wounded the LGBT community through judgmentalism and exclusion, we should find great hope in two important developments that have taken place during the pontificate of Pope Leo which constitute rich seeds for the unfolding of the Gospel in the years to come," the cardinal told the assembly of 500 people in Gaston Hall, the university's auditorium.

McElroy, a top ally of the pope in the U.S. church, pointed to Leo's comments following his April trip to Africa in which he articulated a more expansive view of morality than sexual questions alone.

"I think it's very important that the unity or division of the church should not revolve around sexual matters," Leo told reporters April 23 during a press conference aboard the papal plane back to Rome. "We tend to think that when the church is talking about morality that the only issue of morality is sexual. And in reality I believe there are greater and more important issues such as justice, equality, freedom of men and women, freedom of religion that would all take priority before that particular issue."

That "simple declaration" puts the church's call to chastity into context as a component of Christian moral life and rejects a false reductionism of moral obligations, McElroy said.

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"Too often both in magisterial statements and on the popular level, sexual sins have been condemned with an ardor that effectively places them in the eyes of many believers as the core moral obligation of Christians. This is utterly false to the Gospel of Jesus Christ," the Washington cardinal said.

A second notable development, he added, came in one of the study group reports that sprung from the 2021-24 synod on synodality. The report, issued in May, was compiled by a group of theologians and released by the Vatican with the pope's authorization.

In the report, the theologians acknowledged the church's role in stigmatizing and marginalizing people with same-sex attractions and included testimonies of two married gay Catholics, one of whom criticized conversion therapy.

At one point, the report addresses the impasse between "doctrinal firmness" and "pastoral welcome" in the church's ministry to LGBTQ Catholics, writing: "The Church's mission is not a matter of abstractly proclaiming and deductively applying principles that are set out in an immutable and rigid manner, but of fostering a living encounter with the person of the risen Lord Jesus by engaging with the lived experience of faith of the People of God ... in relation to the diverse situations of life and the many cultural contexts."

McElroy highlighted that section of the report as well as another excerpt emphasizing the singularity of every person. He said Jesus' pastoral method reflected "a specific and consistent pattern."

"First the Lord embraced those who had come to him for help. Then, he assisted them with the issue that was weighing them down. Only then did he call them to reform. This pattern must consistently be reflected in the church's pastoral practice and in our own pastoral outreach to those whom we encounter in our lives within the context of faith," he said.



Outreach is a ministry begun by Jesuit Fr. James Martin to strengthen the relationship between the Catholic Church and LGBTQ Catholics. (Courtesy of Outreach and America Media/Kevin Christopher Robles)

McElroy said he regarded the call to reform the conception of pastoral theology from Pope Francis, who convened the synod on synodality, as the late pope's greatest contribution to the life of the church.

"Pastoral practice is not the understanding of how to apply an already formed and often reified set of principles to concrete situations. It proceeds from the conviction that the concrete situations in which people find themselves are constitutive dimensions of how doctrine should be formed in the light of the kerygma," or full proclamation of the Gospel, the cardinal said.

McElroy, who was a synod delegate along with Martin, gave his homily on the second day of the June 19-21 Outreach conference. Other speakers included Martin, Catholic Charities USA president Kerry Robinson and theological ethicist Jesuit Fr. James Keenan.

Martin, editor-at-large of America magazine, formed Outreach as a ministry to LBGTQ Catholics, in 2022 launching a website providing news and opinion coverage along with pastoral resources for individuals, family, friends and ministers. In the time since, the ministry has drawn opposition from conservative corners of the church, as well as support from Francis and several U.S. cardinals and bishops.

McElroy was the second cardinal to celebrate Mass at an Outreach conference, following his predecessor Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington, who did so in 2024 .