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After being handed the apostolic letter from Pope Leo XIV appointing him as a new auxiliary bishop of Washington, Bishop Robert Boxie III displays the document during his ordination Mass July 7, 2026, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. (OSV News/Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada)

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If Bishop Robert Paul Boxie was selected to become a bishop just because he is Black, he said he is comfortable with that.

"Some people may believe I've been selected, picked, because I'm Black," he said in an interview with Catholic News Service's "Vatican Access." "I've thought about this, I've reflected on it, and you know what, I'm actually OK with that."

One of the newest bishops Pope Leo XIV appointed in the U.S. said racism remains an undercurrent in the Catholic Church, recounting his own encounters with it in the seminary and calling for greater Black representation in the hierarchy, parish life and the church's understanding of holiness.

Boxie, who was named auxiliary bishop of Washington in May, said some critics have labeled him a "DEI bishop," a phrase he dismissed as a "dog whistle" suggesting that a Black person was elevated as part of a diversity, equity and inclusion program at the expense of someone more qualified.

He said his education, formation and ministry should speak for themselves. But while there are many good bishops in the United States, Boxie said he does not believe the hierarchy has always been sufficiently attentive to the concerns of Black Catholics and the broader Black community.

Black Americans make up more than 15% of the U.S. population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate determined that 5% of Catholics identify as Black.

Yet, only five of 268 active U.S. bishops are Black, only two of whom are African American, according to data from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"We need the voice of African American bishops, men in the hierarchy, in the church structure, to be more of an advocate for the Black Catholic community," Boxie said in the Sept. 7 interview.

Before his ordination in July, Boxie said a decade had passed since an African American bishop had been ordained in the country.

"Why are there so few?" he said. "The short answer is racism."

Born in 1980, America's youngest bishop was called to the priesthood after graduating from Vanderbilt University and Harvard Law School and working as an attorney in Washington. Even before entering seminary, Boxie said he carried a strong sense of responsibility as a Black man moving through spaces where few looked like him.

Oftentimes, as an African American in institutions like prestigious schools, "where you are one of one or one of two or very few of you, you do carry that responsibility of making sure that you do a good job," he said. "I carry with me all of my ancestors beforehand who were denied these opportunities."

Their sacrifices, the Louisiana native said, made his own opportunities possible and left him with "a duty and a responsibility to continue to give back, to make a way for others."

Bishop Robert Boxie III, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Washington, poses for a photo i

Bishop Robert Boxie III, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Washington, poses for a photo in Rome, Sept. 7, 2026. (CNS/Robert Duncan)

"It is in the background of knowing where I have come from, what I have been given, and also realizing that I have to give back and help make a way for others, just as others have done for me," Boxie said.

The church has always proclaimed the need to protect and promote the inherent dignity of the human person, the bishop said, but Catholics have not always been faithful to that teaching.

"When we have turned away from that, or when we have been unfaithful to that teaching and gone astray, then that's when problems such as this, racism, have arisen," he said.

Boxie also shared with CNS his own experiences of racism, saying rejection and exclusion have "sadly" been part of the Black Catholic experience.

He recalled arriving at seminary and discovering that the seminarian in the room next to his had hung a Confederate flag on the wall. Boxie said he was "totally taken aback" and refused to enter the room while the flag remained there, even though he was "very social" and others frequented his room.

He repeatedly spoke with his neighbor in the hallway and challenged him about it, saying to the seminarian and his friends that it was "inappropriate." The seminarian eventually removed the flag and later left the seminary after discerning he no longer wanted to pursue the priesthood.

Years later, during the summer of 2020 and the national reckoning that followed the killing of George Floyd, Boxie received an unexpected Facebook message from the former seminarian.

By then, the man was working at a Catholic school with many Black and Hispanic students. He told Boxie that he had come to understand how wrong it had been to display the Confederate flag, particularly in a seminary.

"He wanted to have a conversation, to apologize," the bishop said. "I accepted his apology, and we had a real, honest conversation about race, the church, and how we

can be healers, how we can help bridge these gaps, these disparities, the misunderstanding, all the things that pull us apart, how we can in fact be healers and bridge-builders in the church."

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The Catholic Church in the United States has its own history of involvement with slavery and racial discrimination.

In 1838, Jesuit leaders sold 272 enslaved men, women and children to raise money for Georgetown University, which was then struggling financially. The sale became the subject of renewed public scrutiny after reporting by The New York Times in 2016.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas said the racism he encountered while studying at Conception Seminary College in Missouri contributed to his decision to leave. Thomas has recalled hearing a fellow seminarian respond to the 1968 shooting of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. by saying, "Good — I hope the S.O.B. dies."

At an appearance at the Catholic University of America last year, Thomas said that if Catholic leaders at the time had taken a stronger stand against racism, he might have become a priest.

More recent disputes over police brutality and systemic racism have also exposed divisions among U.S. Catholics.

In 2020, EWTN canceled its radio show "Morning Glory" months after co-host Gloria Purvis began speaking extensively about police brutality and systemic racism following George Floyd's death and the protests that followed.

Purvis, who is Black, told CNS after the cancellation that Catholics should be turning to their faith when confronting such questions.

"We all are members of the human family. We all have a certain dignity," she said in January 2021. "When you see such brutalization of a human person and the murder of a human person … it should bring questions to us. We should be turning to our faith for answers rather than just letting political talk frame the conversation."

She said she was surprised to hear Catholics dismiss concern about Floyd's death after learning details about his life.

"That is not who we are as believers," Purvis said.

In the months and years after Floyd's death, Purvis, who is now a special adviser for Integral Human Development and Dignity at Providence College, told OSV News in May 2025 that priests have preached "ahistorical homilies about lynching, about saying that Black people needed to be grateful to white people that lost their lives during the Civil War."

Polling over the last several years has found a pronounced divide between white Catholics and other Americans in how they understand racial inequality.

In a 2018 Public Religion Research Institute survey, 53% of Americans said police killings of Black men were part of a broader pattern in how law enforcement treats Black Americans. Among white Catholics, just 37% held that view.

A similar divide appeared in a 2022 PRRI survey about the lasting effects of slavery and racial discrimination. Just 35% of white Catholics agreed that those historical injustices continue to make it harder for Black Americans to achieve economic mobility. By comparison, 66% of religiously unaffiliated Americans, 68% of Americans belonging to non-Christian religions and 77% of Black Protestants agreed.

Boxie said he does not know why some racial tensions within the church have gone unaddressed for so long, but said he looks to the Holy Spirit and expressed gratitude for Leo's apology in his recent encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* for the church's historical involvement in slavery.

"It was really earth-shattering," he said. "This is the first time in what, 18 centuries, 19 centuries, that this acknowledgement has been made."

Leo's own heritage depicts the racial tension of American history. He told reporters in July about his familial ties to U.S. slavery when he said his ancestors included both enslaved people and slave owners on his mother's side.

Boxie said Black Catholics themselves can also do more to address what he called "the elephant in the room," including inconsistencies between politics, government, racism and Catholic social teaching.

He also wants Catholic churches to more visibly reflect the racial diversity of the communion of saints.

"In our churches, we often only see white saints, and I have no problem with that. There's nothing wrong with that," he said. "But that's not the only view or the only image or icon of holiness that we can aspire to."

Boxie said every U.S. parish should display images of Black saints, particularly the seven Black Catholics being considered for canonization, as a reminder that their witness belongs to the entire church and "because these were Americans who were raised and formed in this country," and whose lives were marked by racism, exclusion and discrimination.

Their example can encourage Black Catholics "to persevere, to not give up, to stay in the church and to help reform it," while reminding white Catholics that "they're part of our church. They are us."

Conflict and confrontation are not his style, Boxie said. He is more interested in dialogue and in helping white Catholics recognize that Black Catholics are part of the church, have something distinctive to contribute to its life and worship, and that "you don't have to be afraid of us."

Following the pope's apology for the church's involvement in slavery in his encyclical, Boxie said Leo has given the church and the world a moment to "tackle it, to talk about it, to not shy away from it."

"He's equaling the playing field for us to take the ball and to move it forward, not only in the church, but also in our nation, because the terrible things that happened in our country spilled over, unfortunately, into practices in the church as well," he said. "And I think this is really an opportunity for us as Catholics, to lead the way, really for us to lead the way."