

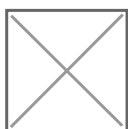
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Derek Scarth, chair of Regis University's board of trustees, and Jesuit Fr. Tom Curran, superior

Derek Scarth, chair of Regis University's board of trustees, and Jesuit Fr. Tom Curran, superior of the Regis University Jesuit House, place the presidential medallion on Shawna Cooper Whitehead during her Sept. 18, 2026, inauguration in Denver as Regis' 29th president. (OSV News/Courtesy of Regis University)

André Escaleira Jr./Denver Catholic

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As Jesuit-run Regis University in Denver approaches its 150th anniversary — in 2027 — the historic significance of its new president, both for Regis and herself, was not lost on Shawna Cooper Whitehead.

Cooper Whitehead is the first African American and the first woman to head Regis and the first Black woman president to lead a U.S. Jesuit university.

"Standing before you is profoundly humble, not because of the title I've been entrusted to hold, but because moments like this remind us of a truth that I've come to understand more deeply with every passing year. None of us arrives anywhere alone," Cooper Whitehead said during the Sept. 18 ceremony inaugurating her as the 29th president of Regis.

Inauguration events began with missioning at the Mass of the Holy Spirit Sept. 17 and concluded with a community picnic the next day.

"When I look back over my own life, I can see moments that made little sense when I was living them," she noted in her address. "But with time and distance, I can see God's fingerprints. ... That is why today begins not with accomplishment, but with gratitude."

Throughout her remarks at the inauguration and the missioning Mass and dinner the prior evening, Cooper Whitehead couldn't help but express gratitude for that accompaniment over the years.

"I stand here today as the 29th president of Regis University and as the first Black woman entrusted with this office. I understand what that means. I honor it. I am humbled by it," she continued. "But I also know that the significance of this moment will not ultimately be determined by who occupies this office. It will be determined by what we do together."

Denver Archbishop James Golka noted the important mission that the university and the entire church share.

"I have long appreciated the distinctive contribution Jesuit education makes to both the church and society," he wrote in a letter read at the inauguration ceremony. "At its best, Jesuit education forms not only capable minds but generous hearts. It teaches us that knowledge is never an end, but rather a gift to be placed at the service of truth, justice and the common good."

That mission comes at a pivotal time for higher education and for the church. In this apostolic age, in which society does not share the church's guiding vision, the mission of Catholic education matters deeply.

"In a world often tempted towards self-promotion and individualism, that motto ('men and women for others') remains both prophetic and urgently needed," the archbishop continued. "It reminds us that authentic education ultimately prepares us not simply for successful careers, but for lives of generous service. It calls each graduate to ask not merely what can I achieve, but rather whom can I serve."

Shawna Cooper Whitehead is prayed over during a missionary rite at a Mass of the Holy Spirit

Shawna Cooper Whitehead is prayed over during a missionary rite at a Mass of the Holy Spirit Sept. 17, 2026, the afternoon before her inauguration as the 29th president of Regis University in Denver. (OSV News/Courtesy of Regis University)

Even amid the challenges, the moment presents an important invitation to the Regis University community, Jesuit Fr. Michael Sheeran, former president of Regis, emphasized.

"Tonight we welcome Dr. Cooper Whitehead, and we pledge to do our part to support her, and to support the archbishop in building up the educated laity and the church in Colorado," he said in remarks delivered at a private dinner the evening before the inauguration.

"I don't come here to build something from scratch, I come to receive what has been entrusted to me." Cooper Whitehead said in remarks at the dinner.

At the core of this reception, emphasized Jesuit Fr. Andrew Kirchman, provincial of the Jesuits USA central and southern province, is a commitment to discernment with the Holy Spirit.

"You are sent to listen more deeply to the Holy Spirit and to one another, so that our structures and ministries may be more agile, more transparent and more responsive to the Gospel in this synodal way," he explained. "I invite you to discern. ... And I invite you to conversion."

Before taking the presidency at Regis, Cooper Whitehead was the vice president of student affairs at Jesuit-run Boston College. She's also been vice president of student services at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, and has held positions at Loyola University Chicago and other universities.

She grew up in Champaign-Urbana, a small city in east-central Illinois and credits her faith formation by her mother and her Catholic elementary school for her career path in Catholic higher education.

"Everything, for me, begins with God," she said in remarks over the inauguration weekend.

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Thanking God for all that has been and looking forward in hope to all that he will bring about, Cooper Whitehead encouraged the university to discern with her how Regis can continue to serve students and the community better in the years to come.

"We are in a particular time in which we need thoughtful leaders who show compassion, intellectual courage and a commitment to the common good. Our Jesuit Catholic higher education has a critical role to play in this space," she explained.

"Regis is necessary. It's needed because the world is simple. It's also complicated.

"Our students need an education that gives them the courage to engage both the simplicity and the complexity, the humility to listen, the wisdom to discern and the conviction to serve."

As they discern together — president, faculty, staff, students, alumni and community — Cooper Whitehead recalled St. Ignatius of Loyola, noting that discernment requires movement.

"Honoring (our) history does not mean preserving Regis exactly as it has been," she said. "If Ignatius teaches us anything, it is that discernment requires movement. The soldier became a seeker. The seeker became a pilgrim. And the pilgrim kept moving. Regis must keep moving too. ... So, as we turn from gratitude toward the future, what will our 'yes' be? Our yes must begin with mission."

[André Escaleira Jr. is managing editor of Denver Catholic and El Pueblo Católico, the English- and Spanish-language news outlets of the Archdiocese of Denver. This story was originally published by Denver Catholic and distributed through a partnership with OSV News.]