

in a

Word™

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**We thank Cardinal Wilton Gregory
for his service to the Church and
wish him a blessed retirement**

(Photo by Fr. James Pawlicki, SVD)

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I am writing today to address a few words to you in these delicate moments that you are living as Pastors of the People of God who walk together in the United States of America.

The journey from slavery to freedom that the People of Israel traveled, as narrated in the Book of Exodus, invites us to look at the reality of our time, so clearly marked by the phenomenon of migration, as a decisive moment in history to reaffirm not only our faith in a God who is always close, incarnate, migrant and refugee, but also the infinite and transcendent dignity of every human person.

These words with which I begin are not an artificial construct. Even a cursory examination of the Church's social doctrine emphatically shows that Jesus Christ is the true Emmanuel (cf. *Mt* 1:23); he did not live apart from the difficult experience of being expelled from his own land because of an imminent risk to his life, and from the experience of having to take refuge in a society and a culture foreign to his own. The Son of God, in becoming man, also chose to live the drama of immigration. I like to recall, among other things, the words with which Pope Pius XII began his Apostolic Constitution on the Care of Migrants, which is considered the "Magna Carta" of the Church's thinking on migration:

"The family of Nazareth in exile, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, emigrants in Egypt and refugees there to escape the wrath of an ungodly king, are the model, the example and the consolation of emigrants and pilgrims of every age and country, of all refugees of every condition who, beset by persecution or necessity, are forced to leave their homeland, beloved family and dear friends for foreign lands."

Likewise, Jesus Christ, loving everyone with a universal love, educates us in the permanent recognition of the dignity of every human being, without exception. In fact, when we speak of "infinite and transcendent dignity," we wish to emphasize that the most decisive value possessed by the human person surpasses and sustains every other juridical consideration that can be made to regulate life in society. Thus, all the Christian faithful and people of good will are called upon to consider the legitimacy of norms and public policies in the light of the dignity of the person and his or her fundamental rights, not vice versa.

I have followed closely the major crisis that is taking place in the United States with the initiation of a program of mass deportations. The rightly formed conscience cannot fail to make a critical judgment and express its disagreement with any measure that tacitly or explicitly identifies the illegal status of some migrants with criminality. At the same time, one must recognize the right of a nation to defend itself and keep communities safe from those who have committed violent or serious crimes while in the country or prior to arrival. That said, the act of deporting people who in many cases have left their own land for reasons of extreme poverty, insecurity, exploitation, persecution or serious deterioration of the environment, damages the dignity of many men and women, and of entire families, and places them in a state of particular vulnerability and defenselessness.

This is not a minor issue: an authentic rule of law is verified precisely in the dignified treatment that all people deserve, especially the poorest and most marginalized. The true common good is promoted when society and government, with creativity and strict respect for the rights of all — as I have affirmed on numerous occasions — welcomes, protects, promotes and integrates the most fragile, unprotected and vulnerable. This does not impede the development of a policy that regulates orderly and legal migration. However, this development cannot come about through the privilege of some and the sacrifice of others. What is built on the basis of force, and not on the truth about the equal dignity of every human being, begins badly and will end badly.

Christians know very well that it is only by affirming the infinite dignity of all that our own identity as persons and as communities reaches its maturity. Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups. In other words: the human person is not a mere individual, relatively expansive, with some philanthropic feelings! The human person is a subject with dignity who, through the constitutive relationship with all, especially with the poorest, can gradually mature in his identity and vocation. The true *ordo amoris* that must be promoted is that which we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the “Good Samaritan” (cf. *Lk* 10:25-37), that is, by meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception.

But worrying about personal, community or national identity, apart from these considerations, easily introduces an ideological criterion that distorts social life and imposes the will of the strongest as the criterion of truth.

I recognize your valuable efforts, dear brother bishops of the United States, as you work closely with migrants and refugees, proclaiming Jesus Christ and promoting fundamental human rights. God will richly reward all that you do for the protection and defense of those who are considered less valuable, less important or less human!

I exhort all the faithful of the Catholic Church, and all men and women of good will, not to give in to narratives that discriminate against and cause unnecessary suffering to our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters. With charity and clarity we are all called to live in solidarity and fraternity, to build bridges that bring us ever closer together, to avoid walls of ignominy and to learn to give our lives as Jesus Christ gave his for the salvation of all.

Let us ask Our Lady of Guadalupe to protect individuals and families who live in fear or pain due to migration and/or deportation. May the “*Virgen morena*”, who knew how to reconcile peoples when they were at enmity, grant us all to meet again as brothers and sisters, within her embrace, and thus take a step forward in the construction of a society that is more fraternal, inclusive and respectful of the dignity of all.

Fraternally,

Francis

From the Vatican, 10 February 2025

in a word or two

Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, 77, from the pastoral governance of the Archdiocese of Washington, and has appointed Cardinal Robert W. McElroy of San Diego, as his successor. Canon law required Cardinal Gregory, 77, to submit his resignation to the pope when the cardinal turned 75, which was Dec. 7, 2022.

Decades of Service

Cardinal Gregory has been a pioneering prelate. He converted to the Catholic faith in sixth grade while attending St. Carthage Catholic School in his hometown of Chicago, and was ordained a priest of that archdiocese in 1973.

He became the youngest Catholic bishop in the U.S. at age 34 when he was ordained an auxiliary bishop of Chicago in 1983. In 1994, he was ordained bishop of Belleville, Illinois.

In 2005, he became the third African American to serve as archbishop of Atlanta, an archdiocese that during his tenure grew to some 1.2 million Catholics across 69 counties.

In 2019, he was appointed the first African American archbishop of Washington. Pope Francis elevated him to cardinal in 2020. Cardinal Gregory was also the first African American elected as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, serving from 2001-2004.

A Leader through sex abuse scandal

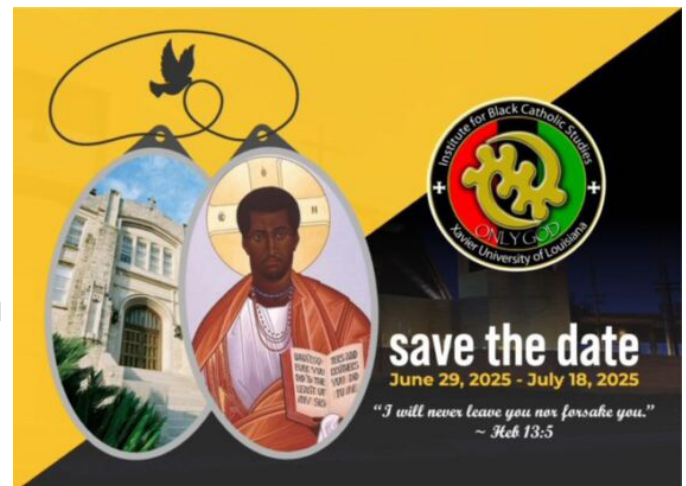
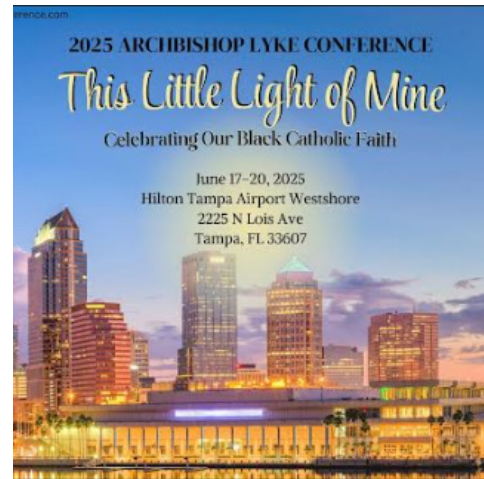
His tenure as USCCB president coincided with the explosive clerical sex abuse scandal in the Archdiocese of Boston. The crisis — while not the first known sex abuse scandal of the Catholic Church in the U.S. — provided the impetus, along with other emerging diocesan abuse scandals at the time, for the U.S. bishops to develop and adopt their “[Charter for the Protection for Children and Young People](#).”

The watershed document that then-Bishop Gregory helped shepherd the U.S. bishops to develop in Dallas June 13-15, 2002 — commonly called the Dallas Charter — lays out a comprehensive set of procedures for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. The charter also includes guidelines for reconciliation, healing, accountability and prevention of abuse.

As the charter neared its 20th anniversary, Cardinal Gregory said that the charter marked a “pivotal moment” in the history of the Catholic Church in the U.S. But he said the task of confronting sexual abuse in the church “is not complete.”

“Certainly 20 years ago when the charter was first enacted and ratified, I think the people of God breathed a sigh of relief that finally the bishops were taking action together that would address the issue,” he said. “But ... with each revelation that involved a bishop not taking appropriate action, with each revelation that a bishop himself was engaged in this terrible criminal behavior, the progress that was made over months and years was weakened.”

We are grateful for your service to the Church Cardinal Gregory. We wish you a blessed retirement.



Divine Word Missionaries is an international missionary community of over 7,000 brothers and priests. In 1905 the SVDs began working among African Americans in the Southern United States. Today, Divine Word Missionaries work in over 35 parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Florida and Arkansas. IN A WORD is a publication of The Society of the Divine Word's Media Production Center. Rev. James Pawlicki, S.V.D., Director and Editor; Cathy Green-Miner, office manager; consultant.

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