

Wilton Gregory to lead Catholic archdiocese of Washington, D.C.

## **Gregory helped navigate the church's response to the 2002 sexual abuse scandals—including new policies and norms to address it.**

by [Religion News Service staff](#) and [Christian Century staff](#)

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Archbishop Wilton Gregory speaks during a mass of repentance for clergy sexual abuse on June 14, 2017, in Indianapolis. AP Photo/Darron Cummings.

Wilton Gregory, 71, archbishop of Atlanta, will be installed May 21 as head of the influential Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., the first African American in the role.

“Archbishop Gregory will be able to identify with and compassionately serve all of the people of this archdiocese, who represent very diverse ethnic, cultural and social

backgrounds,” said Bishop Roy E. Campbell, an auxiliary bishop in Washington and a fellow member of the body of black Catholic bishops in the United States, in a statement.

The appointment appeared geared toward setting a new tone of accountability on the revived sexual abuse crisis that has roiled the church since last year. As president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops from 2001 to 2004, Gregory helped navigate the church’s response to the 2002 sexual abuse scandals and oversaw the formation and implementation of new policies and norms to address it, such as the Dallas Charter and the USCCB’s Essential Norms. He also participated in a working group tasked with formulating methods for holding high-level clerics accountable.

Gregory was ordained in 1971 in Chicago, where he was an auxiliary bishop. He was bishop of Belleville, Illinois, before going to Atlanta in 2005. In his time as archbishop, the archdiocese has grown to approximately 1.2 million Catholics, according to its website.

Gregory succeeds Donald Wuerl, who stepped down as archbishop after being named in an exhaustive Pennsylvania grand jury report on sexual abuse in the church, whose authors alleged that he had mishandled sexual abuse cases while serving as bishop of Pittsburgh. Wuerl, while pushing the Vatican to take a tougher stance on child sexual abuse, initially defended his record and rebutted some of the report’s claims, but Pope Francis eventually accepted his resignation in October.

Wuerl also came under fire for statements he made last summer denying he knew about accounts of abuse of minors and seminarians by his predecessor, Theodore McCarrick, the *Washington Post* reported. In January, [Wuerl apologized](#) to a priest who had made a complaint about McCarrick in 2004, which Wuerl had taken to the Vatican. Wuerl said that he had forgotten about that 14 years later when he said he was not aware of allegations or rumors about McCarrick.

In his response to the accounts brought to light about McCarrick, in August [Gregory wrote in a statement released by the Archdiocese of Atlanta](#): “I am personally disheartened because in 2002 I stood before the body of bishops and the people of God as president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and made assurances in my own name and that of the church in the United States that this crisis of faith and leadership was over and would not be repeated. I sincerely

believed that the unprecedented steps we took at that time would help to heal this wound in the Body of Christ. And so they have, though obviously not completely or even sufficiently.”

**FOLLOWING UP (Updated June 19, 2019):** Gregory began his tenure as Catholic archbishop of Washington pledging to be a transparent leader “who honestly confesses his faults and failings before you when I commit them, not when they are revealed,” Religion News Service reported. Gregory, who is expected to be named the first African American cardinal, compared the current church climate to the churning sea endured by Jesus and his disciples.

“We clerics and hierarchs have irrefutably been the source of this current tempest,” he said at his installation in late May. The congregation responded with applause.

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