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An older Black man wearing a clerical collar and black jacket sits in front of an audience

Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory gestures as he speaks at The Catholic University of America in Washington Dec. 6, 2033, to discuss the need for a diverse and welcoming church. The cardinal fielded a wide range of audience questions, including those related to liturgy. (OSV News photo/Patrick G. Ryan, courtesy The Catholic University of America)

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At The Catholic University of America to discuss the need for a diverse and welcoming church, Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory fielded a wide range of audience questions while also reflecting on his own faith journey from childhood.

The Dec. 6 talk, "Celebrating Diversity," on the eve of the 40th anniversary of Cardinal Gregory's ordination as an auxiliary bishop of Chicago, touted the work of the Archdiocese of Washington's Office of Cultural Diversity and Outreach and its Catholic Civil Dialogue Initiative.

"We are directly challenged to show respect to those we encounter," Gregory said. That task has become more challenging recently in the wake of public displays of

racism, antisemitism, which has found renewed expression in the wake of Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza, and contempt for the poor, which has never gone away.

But "the Bible reminds us that being in community is not easy," he added.

Gregory praised the recent Synod on Synodality assembly in Rome convened by Pope Francis, which concluded its first session with a call for greater "co-responsibility" among the baptized for the church's mission. Its second session begins next October.

The cardinal criticized "those who are distorting Pope Francis' vision of the synodal church." He thinks it should be used "to bring the church into the future," although others want "to solidify current pastoral practice so only they know the true church."

Gregory also reflected, "In our world and our American society today, we are also facing a culture of isolation" aggravated further by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have forgotten our interconnectedness," he said. "We seem to have forgotten what our parents and grandparents taught us: to respect others."

He also said the synodal process "had been a reminder of the church's ability to call all people into community," including LGBTQ+ Catholics and parishioners in difficult marital situations. "All these sisters and brothers are looking for a church environment in which they are not perceived as outsiders."

"Each of us," Gregory said, "wants to believe that we are cherished, valued and known by others and able to "express yourself freely with no judgment." Effective dialogue requires "active, sincere listening," although he acknowledged, "it will take us several years to find an effective way to dialogue together."

Recognizing people on the margins is built into the consistent ethic of life, he reminded his audience. "There's a dignity to life that begins at conception, and you can never lose it, despite all the circumstances you may encounter in life."

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He recalled warmly his time at St. Carthage Grammar School in Chicago, where he was received into the Catholic faith. "I was just mesmerized," he said, adding that

one of his grandmothers, who worked as a domestic, cooked and did laundry for a community of Dominican nuns to pay for his tuition and fees -- a whopping $76 his family could not afford.

"I'm a big proponent of making sure that our schools invited the non-Catholics," he said.

In response to a question from a Catholic University freshman, Gregory launched into a spirited defense of the Latin Church's Roman liturgical reform following the Second Vatican Council.

"When Pope Paul VI instituted the new tradition, he made an exception for some of the older priests. But it was his desire, his intent, to say when that generation goes, everyone will do the new Mass," he said.

But all these changes take root over a much longer period of time than people generally acknowledge.

"Two hundred years after [the Council of] Trent, there were parishes celebrating the pre-Trent Mass," Gregory said, referring to the reforms of the 16th-century ecumenical council.

Francis, Gregory said, "is trying to complete what Paul VI began" with the reformed Mass "as the dominant rite, but with limited exceptions."

This was difficult even in the Washington Archdiocese, where the late Cardinal James A. Hickey allowed the Mass in the older form of the Roman rite, commonly called the "traditional Latin Mass." It had grown to eight locations within the archdiocese until last year, when the cardinal limited its celebration to just three, following the parameters of Francis' 2021 decree "Traditionis Custodes."

This requires a stern approach sometimes, Gregory said. "I think the Holy Father is right to say, 'Deal with the priests. ' "

Acknowledging the difficulty in leading others to a relationship with the church, Gregory said, "You're not going to be successful in witnessing your faith on the first try." Instead, he called it "a long slog."