

## Monastic Scribe XLV: February 17, 2023

### OUR BLACK BROTHER

According to the Synodal report published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), people taking part in the synodal discussions largely feel the American Bishops have not been good spiritual leaders. The tendency to generalize allows some Catholics to question whether there are any good bishops at all. I don't believe that is the case. We have some wonderful, good, and holy bishops though they are not prominent in the conference meetings that the press covers each year. In this month of Black History I want to talk about Wilton D. Gregory, the current Archbishop of Washington. I really admire this man. He is the first African-American to be made a Cardinal and his resume is that of a brave, insightful man truly dedicated to the gospel and the church.

Wilton Gregory is a native of Chicago, born in 1947. He is a convert to Catholicism who was ordained a priest in 1973. He was then sent to the Benedictine university of Sant' Anselmo in Rome in 1973 and obtained a doctorate in Sacred Liturgy. I guess he was seen to be a good student. From 1976 to 1983 he served as a Chicago diocesan priest. Then for the ten years of 1983 – 1993 he was an Auxiliary Bishop in the Archdiocese of Chicago assisting Cardinal Bernardine. In 1993 he was made the Bishop of Belleville, Illinois which he served until 2004.

Respect from brother bishops led him to be elected the President of the United State Conference of Catholic Bishops for the term of 2001-2003. It was during this time that the sexual abuse crisis broke, particularly in Boston in 2002. Bishop Gregory proved to be an aggressive and determined leader in facing this issue. He helped push through the Charter for the Defense of Children. In recognition for this strong leadership, Time Magazine made him their Person of the Year at the end of 2002.

Wilton Gregory then served as the Archbishop of Atlanta, Georgia from 2004 to 2019. He inspired people with his concern for racial justice. Pope Francis appointed him Archbishop of Washington D.C. and made him a Cardinal of the Church in 2019. His inclusive approach to LGBTQ people was tested when some people demanded he remove the Rector of Immaculate Conception Basilica for welcoming transgender people, which he refused to do. He reprimanded President Donald Trump for making a display before a church with his Bible and for his usage of language of offense and disrespect for others. He has spoken openly to President Biden about some of his policies but has refused to follow other bishops in denying the reception of the eucharist to the

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President which is, for him, politicizing the eucharist. He has been the Patron of the Cross Catholic Outreach, the organization which helps the poor and their communities. He inspires the Black community as, in a recent talk, he urged “ordinary people of color to improve our world with an understanding of the strength of character that resides within the souls of our people.”

Perhaps less well known is Cardinal Gregory’s concern about the growth of anti-semiticism. He grew up in Chicago and became aware of the vibrant and important Jewish community in that city. Now he serves as the Catholic Co-chair of the National Council of Synagogues’ consultation for the USCCB and is a previous chair of the bishops’ committee for interreligious dialogue. He feels that Catholics, particularly young Catholics, need to be better informed and recognize the damage done to individuals or Jewish institutions. He calls on Catholics to be on top of what’s happening and stand up against the destructive forces that seem to be increasingly erupting in too many places in the country. He pushes Catholics to be more aware of their own history and know what the Second Vatican Council proclaimed in its decree, *Nostra Aetate*.

I doubt if many Catholics know much about Wilton Gregory. I am not sure whether he is a great orator or preacher (The Anglican Bishop Curley shines in this way). He is not a show boater but just consistently is the good shepherd that Christ praised. I hold him up for recognition for a couple of reasons. Our culture, as well as the church, is marked by polarization and disagreement that often turns to hatred and anger. We must stop this negative approach. I also hold him up because we need to avoid cynicism and despair about our leaders. Yes, there are good bishops. Yes, there are good priests, despite clericalism and the sexual abuse crisis. And, yes there are good politicians and good police men and women. We need to avoid wholesale condemnation of people and groups. We need to avoid scapegoating people and groups and take responsibility ourselves. I hope you see my point. You can contact me at: [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto:joycet@glastonburyabbey.org)

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.