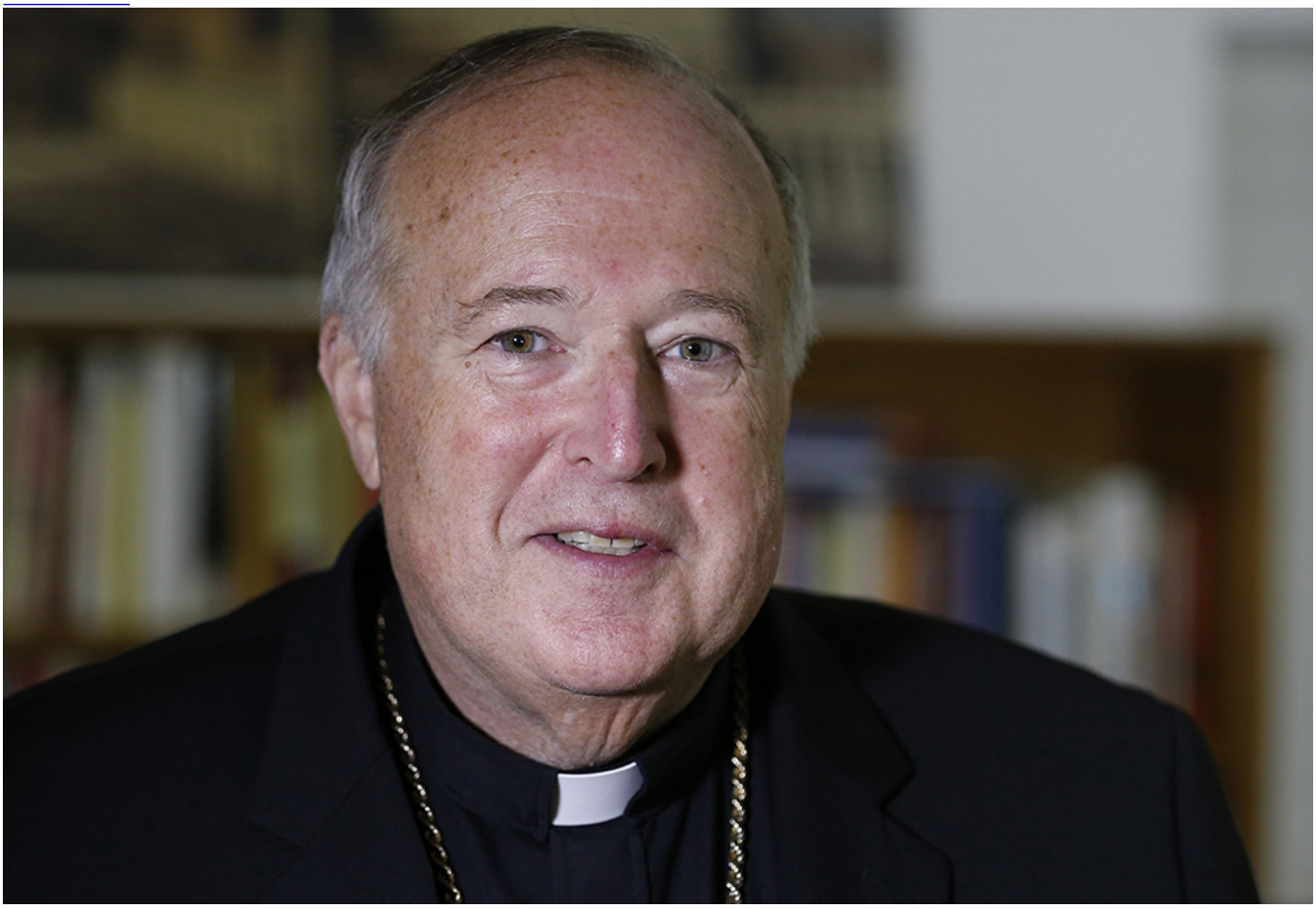
Opinion
Editorial



Cardinal Robert McElroy is pictured in a 2019 photo. Pope Francis appointed Cardinal McElroy as the next archbishop of Washington in an announcement publicized on Jan. 6. (OSV News/Catholic News Service/Paul Haring)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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We are in a moment of unprecedented division and uncertainty in both the church and society. That's why Pope Francis could not have made a better choice to lead the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., when he tapped Cardinal Robert McElroy.

The church in the District of Columbia and southern Maryland is receiving a worthy successor to Cardinal Wilton Gregory, the first African American to be named both a cardinal in the United States and archbishop of Washington. The church owes an enormous debt of gratitude to Gregory who, in 2002, led a reluctant U.S. hierarchy to its first acknowledgement of the truth of the abuse crisis, and for stepping in to steady an archdiocese shaken by scandal.

It could reasonably be said that McElroy, a towering intellectual and a model pastor, has long been in training for his new assignment. He is deeply committed to the fullness of the church's social justice tradition and to the reforms initiated by Vatican II and further accelerated by Pope Francis. As an advocate for immigrants and other scapegoated groups, the soft-spoken cardinal is clear and unequivocal.

In this OSV News composite photo, Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory, seen at left, gives his homily during the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage Mass June 9, 2024, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Cardinal Robert McElroy, right, is seen in this undated photo provided by the Diocese of San Diego. (OSV News composite/Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada; Courtesy of the Diocese of San Diego)

Much has been said already in secular and religious circles about McElroy's scathing criticism of the first term of Donald Trump and what it might signify for the future. It doesn't take a Ph.D. in politics or theology — and McElroy has earned one in each — to worry about a civic and moral danger ahead. Trump is set to be the only man to occupy the Oval Office as a convicted felon, and the only one to incite an insurrection to interfere with the certification of an election that he lost.

In these unprecedented times, the church and the culture will be served well by an authoritative Catholic leader in Washington, and one who speaks knowledgably and passionately about the church's social teaching.

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McElroy comes to his new station with salient accomplishments. His academic achievements are regularly cited because they involve an unusual complex of disciplines for a Catholic prelate. His study of an eminent U.S. theologian resulted in his dissertation published as a book — *The Search for an American Public Theology: The Contribution of John Courtney Murray*.

Foremost will be his new role as pastor of a diverse and fascinating archdiocese of some 670,000 Catholics. In many parishes in Washington, one might encounter people of every hue and background, speaking many different languages, of every social strata, including the poorest of the poor, or the most desperate of refugees, worshiping side by side.

The city is also the locus for dozens of Catholic charitable organizations spanning interests, ideologies and theologies — from pacifists to the Archdiocese for the the Military Services, from Catholic Workers to libertarians, from Latin Mass traditionalists to advocates for women's ordination and LGBTQ rights — all seeking to influence church and society.

It is also a political center where the quest for power and influence, fueled by inexhaustible amounts of money, is constant. That includes deep-pocketed conservative Catholics and organizations that have succeeded of late in projecting themselves as superior arbiters of Catholic identity, bolstered by a vigorous contingent of young, conservative priests bemused by synodality and skeptical of the kind of progressivism the new archbishop embodies.

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McElroy will face all of that without the historic unity and backing of an altered U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Once a powerful cultural force that spoke with clarity on major issues in the wider culture, the bishops' conference has been wounded by the sexual abuse scandal and riven with divisions in their ranks that mirror those in the secular culture.

The new archbishop brings to Washington a long and well-earned reputation as a pastor. He has gone to great lengths both in San Francisco as a parish pastor and as bishop of San Diego to consult widely, to listen to the needs of the people of God, and to advocate for radical inclusion, even supporting the concept of women deacons.

Far from being a culture warrior, McElroy will disappoint the demands of the extremes. He is a reformer in the model of Pope Francis, whose priorities — synodality, care of the earth, focusing on those on society's margins and ending the scandal of clericalism — he has made his own.

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In his dissertation-turned-book, now a hot commodity among church watchers, McElroy wrote that Murray was convinced that "the political institutions of American life were increasingly alienated from their spiritual roots and were becoming enemies to the dignity of the human person rather than supports to that dignity. Unless this process was reversed, Murray told the America of the 1950s, the noble experiment that was American democracy could not hope to survive."

Near the end of the first year of the Trump administration, in a 2017 interview with NCR, McElroy worried that talks planned for an upcoming U.S. bishops' meeting were missing the moment. "Part of me would like us to scotch the whole agenda and spend the time on: 'How do we help our nation at this moment?' I'm very alarmed about where we're going," he said. "I believe we're in a cultural crisis in our body politic."

McElroy saw the church, along with other religious and moral communities, as an antidote to the entrenched partisanship fracturing the country and alienating its citizens.

The overriding question, he said, is: "How can we, as the bishops of the United States, in collaboration with others, serve the society, which is in great need now?"

The question is more compelling now than ever.

Welcome to Washington, Cardinal McElroy.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.