



Pope Francis greets Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican on Oct. 10, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

by NCR Staff

[View Author Profile](#)

## [\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

January 5, 2025

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Pope Francis has tapped Cardinal Robert McElroy as the new archbishop of Washington, D.C., appointing one of his top U.S. allies, one of the American church's most forceful defenders of migrants and a sharp critic of Donald Trump's first administration just days before Trump takes office a second time.

McElroy of San Diego will succeed retiring Cardinal Wilton Gregory, 77, who has led the Washington Archdiocese since 2019, where he became the city's first African American archbishop. In 2020, Francis [elevated](#) him to the College of Cardinals, making him the first Black U.S. cardinal.

News of the appointment was first reported, including by the National Catholic Reporter, on Jan. 5. Official confirmation was published in the Vatican's daily bulletin on Jan. 6.

Over the last decade, McElroy has become one of the most vocal champions of Pope Francis' pastoral agenda among the U.S. hierarchy. He has frequently echoed the pope's prioritization of [migrants and refugees](#), [environmental concerns](#) and a more [welcoming approach](#) to LGBTQ people.

The pope's selection of a prelate who has not shied from implicit criticism of Trump comes just after Trump announced his selection of a [sharp critic of Francis](#) to be the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See — which also marks a contrast to the warm relations the pontiff has enjoyed with President Joe Biden, who is [set to visit Francis on Friday \(Jan. 10\)](#) at the Vatican.

McElroy, 70, was first made an auxiliary bishop of San Francisco in 2010 by Pope Benedict XVI and then named bishop of San Diego by Francis in 2015. In 2022, the pope [made him a cardinal](#). He has a bachelor's degree from Harvard University, and a master's in U.S. history and a doctorate in political science from Stanford University, among other degrees.

In the U.S. church, McElroy has struck a contrast to many of the more traditionalist bishops in the U.S. and has become one of the leading proponents of Francis' push for [synodality](#), which focuses on greater lay involvement in the life of the church.

Soon after arriving in San Diego, McElroy held a first-of-its-kind [diocesan synod](#) on marriage and family in 2016. He was later named as a papal appointee to the 2019 special synod on the Amazon region and the 2023 and 2024 synod on synodality.

In recent years, McElroy has published a series of essays reflecting on the global synod process. The cardinal has called for "radical inclusion" in the church, particularly among the divorced and remarried and LGBTQ Catholics, as well as voicing his support for the restoration of the female diaconate. Those writings set off a firestorm among conservative Catholics, with [one U.S. bishop suggesting](#) the cardinal to be a heretic.



Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego exits the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican after the morning session of the Synod of Bishops on synodality on Oct. 7, 2024. (CNS/Robert Duncan)

As the San Diego cardinal will now lead the Catholic Church in the American capital, he is set to take over at the start of a new political administration that has vowed to deport millions of undocumented migrants and blasted climate change as a hoax.

In 2017, just one month into Trump's first term, McElroy [delivered a fiery speech](#) to community activists that amounted to a repudiation of the new president's political

agenda.

"We must disrupt those who would seek to send troops into our streets to deport the undocumented, to rip mothers and fathers from their families," McElroy said. "We must disrupt those who portray refugees as enemies, rather than our brothers and sisters in terrible need. We must disrupt those who train us to see Muslim men and women and children as sources of fear rather than as children of God."

## Advertisement

While often using sharp rhetoric to criticize Trump's initiatives to end refugee resettlement programs and separate migrant families, McElroy has also [emphasized](#) the need for dialogue to improve the country's immigration policies.

McElroy now takes the reins from Gregory, a churchman who rose to prominence in the early 2000s when he served as president of the U.S. bishops' conference as they navigated their response to the early days of the sexual abuse crisis.

**[Related: San Diego bishop responds to survivor advocate letter that alleged abuse by McCarrick](#)**

A Chicago native and a convert to Catholicism, he was an auxiliary bishop of his hometown archdiocese from 1983 to 1994. From 1994 to 2004, he was bishop of the Diocese of Belleville, Illinois, and in 2004 was appointed archbishop of Atlanta, Georgia, where he served from 2005 until 2019.

Gregory's transfer to Washington in 2019 came in the midst of a major racial reckoning in the United States.

His appointment to one of the most important centers of African American heritage in the nation was widely [celebrated](#) by the city's Black community. However, the early days of his tenure were largely overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which shuttered churches and limited public engagements.



Cardinal Robert McElroy and Cardinal Wilton Gregory are seated at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington D.C., prior to a Jan. 6 press conference announcing McElroy's appointment to the Washington Archdiocese. (NCR photo/James Grimaldi)

During his time in the Archdiocese of Washington, Gregory [resisted](#) a push by conservative U.S. bishops to deny Communion to President Joe Biden, the nation's second Catholic president, over his support for abortion rights.

Like McElroy, Gregory was selected by Francis to serve as a papal delegate to the 2023 and 2024 synod on synodality in Rome.

In a brief statement, McElroy said he was honored to take up the new post, but paid tribute to the last decade he served in San Diego.

"I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the Catholic community in our nation's capital and for the confidence His Holiness has placed in me, but I have truly loved the last ten years I've spent as bishop of San Diego," he wrote. "I have never in my life felt more welcomed, more supported or more rewarded than I felt sharing my

ministry with the priests, the women religious, and the faithful parishioners of our diocese. I cannot thank you enough."



Cardinal Robert McElroy greets Cardinal Wilton Gregory during a press conference Jan. 6 at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington, D.C., announcing McElroy's appointment to the Washington Archdiocese. (NCR photo/James Grimaldi)

At a virtual press conference on Jan. 6, McElroy said that his first job as the city's new archbishop will be to consult with the archdiocese's priests and lay leaders to better understand the needs of the local church.

"In seeking encounter, one must truly be open to understanding the background, the experiences, the opinions, the dreams and the challenges of the other," he said.

The cardinal acknowledged the legacy of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, which has roiled the archdiocese since its former archbishop, the ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, was revealed to be a serial abuser. McElroy lamented that history as a "massive betrayal," that has ongoing moral and financial repercussions for the

archdiocese.

When asked about how he intended to engage the incoming Trump administration, he pledged to pray for its success to "truly make the nation better." But he warned that some of the potential plans for "indiscriminate" deportations of migrants would be incompatible with the church's social teaching.

"We'll have to see what emerges," he said.

The cardinal also vowed to continue to prioritize environmental concerns in the archdiocese. He said that care for the planet is a "top" issue in the world today, particularly when it comes to young people. Last year, the San Diego Diocese, under his leadership, became the [first](#) to divest from fossil fuels.

At the end of the press conference, Gregory said he intends to live in Washington in retirement. McElroy's installation, where he will formally take over the archdiocesan leadership, is slated for March.

*This breaking news story has been updated.*

**[Read this next: Pope Francis picks an advocate for church reform for Washington, DC](#)**