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Cardinal Robert McElroy addresses reporters Feb. 27 at the San Diego Archdiocesan Pastoral Center in his final news conference as San Diego's Catholic spiritual leader.(NCR photo//Chris Stone)



by Ken Stone

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Cardinal Robert McElroy has no plans to meet President Donald Trump after he is installed as the new archbishop of Washington, D.C., in two weeks, yet the cardinal has had a telephone call with former President Joe Biden to discuss [the pope's health crisis](#).

The Catholic Church's role in the nation's capital is not to solve political problems or steer policy but to give witness to those affected by national initiatives, McElroy said Feb. 27 in his final [news conference](#) as San Diego's Catholic spiritual leader.

"We're in a turning-point moment in the history of our country," McElroy said. "This is a moment where we really have to grapple with: What does it mean in our society to be a compassionate society ... and we believe in the human dignity of every person?"

He added: "Those are the areas of witness that the church is called to bring."

Sweeping layoffs at federal agencies are likely to have hit many of the more than 500,000 Catholics in the District of Columbia and southern Maryland where McElroy will serve as spiritual shepherd.

Speaking before seven news cameras in the chapel of the diocesan pastoral center, McElroy took questions on a range of topics, from the political climate in Washington to the Trump administration's aggressive stand on immigration.

Biden, a Catholic close to Francis, was among many people to call McElroy recently about the pope's health.

"I had a lengthy call with President Biden the other day," said McElroy, whose Washington connections include Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts — they were Harvard classmates. Biden shared that he was praying for the pontiff.

McElroy called the prospect of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids on churches "a deeply moral question." Such [raids "strike fear](#) in everyone's heart" who is undocumented. "It acts as a deterrent to people going to church and freely worshipping."

He said Francis would oppose mass deportation.

"I can tell you without fear of hesitation, he would be against such moves," McElroy said.

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McElroy referred to the pope's recent [letter to the bishops' conference](#), noting that Catholic teaching says a country has a right to control its borders, "a legitimate objective to pursue."

But what is going on now, the pope's letter said, is a "wider cultural attack" on those fleeing persecution and violence.

The pope said it is a problem in society to classify immigrants as criminals.

"When you classify people as criminals," McElroy said, you class them as "the other, as different," and thus deserving lesser treatment.

On any prospect of meeting Trump, McElroy said his role in Washington would be pastoral, with a large share of parishioners coming from Latin America, mostly Central America.

Although the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has sued the government](#) to resume financial aid for resettlement of legally admitted refugees, McElroy said he had no role to play in that case filed in Washington.

"Our own [Catholic Charities](#) has been very, very active — and proud of the work they have done," he said. "At one point, we were transitioning about 800 a day" mostly to relatives in the United States.

"That work was done with substantial federal funding" along with state money, he said.

[McElroy's installation Mass](#) as D.C. archbishop, set for March 11, "won't occur" if he's in Rome for a potential papal conclave, he noted after recalling the prayers his diocese has been involved with for the pope's recovery. He said he won't be archbishop until such an installation takes place. It would be postponed.

McElroy is to succeed retiring Cardinal Wilton Gregory, the Washington Archdiocese's first Black archbishop. In discussing his departure from San Diego,

McElroy expressed love for the city. "Part of my heart will always be here in San Diego, whether I am in Washington or wherever I am," McElroy said.

Though he is to become the archbishop in the nation's capital, McElroy noted that the bishops' conference is the official liaison with the government.

In November 2021, McElroy underwent heart bypass surgery. On Thursday, he said that issue has been resolved and that he's lost weight under doctor's orders. He said his health is OK.