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Bishop Gregory

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than that of being the first bishops' conference president from a racial minority: He's an African-American convert to Catholicism who knows a lot about liturgy, articulates the church's teachings and positions well, and is known as a fair and even-handed leader.

An advocate for the poor who last year called on the federal government to increase food stamp allocations in a farm bill, Bishop Gregory has already begun to make his own individual mark in the public eye. At a Jan. 28-30 international conference in Washington, he spoke about economic justice with representatives of the world's bishops who were meeting with an array of government, banking, commerce, labor and academic leaders. The "Conference on Humanizing the Global Economy" at Catholic University of America was slated to discuss how the increasingly global economy can be humanized.

Bishop Gregory linked the Washington conference to a similar landmark meeting on debt convened by the Vatican and U.S. bishops at Seton Hall University in New Jersey in 1998. At Seton Hall "key decision-makers, within and outside government, reached a greater understanding of the ethical dimensions of Third World debt," he said, and the meeting contributed to "significant progress on debt relief" in the years that followed.

Novel position

In an interview with Catholic News Service a few days before his election, Bishop Gregory was both amused and pragmatic about a flurry of media inquiries, all focused on his race.

"I'm sure that Bishop Fiorenza and Bishop Pilla before him did not get this kind of probing," he said of his immediate predecessors as president, Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston, president from 1998-2001, and Bishop Anthony M. Pilla of Cleveland, president from 1995-98. "It's an indication that race is still a significant factor in our society."

"While we're choosing to make good on our commitment as bishops at least in this one area — and I hope it's seen as only one area — to elect a black president of the USCCB I hope is a wonderful and important sign of our commitment," he said. "But it can't be the only sign. We haven't achieved all that we need to achieve by having a black president."

"The day-to-day struggle, the constant commitment to the social teaching and to the truth of the Gospel that stand in contradistinction to racism have to be the ongoing policy of the conference and of every local church and of every Catholic. We can rejoice at one event, but not presume that the battle is over. Because it isn't."

If the narrow focus of the interest in him gets to be a little annoying at times, Bishop Gregory is well aware that the novelty of his position opens new doors: to give non-Catholics a view into today's church; to help all Catholics understand the breadth



Dobbie HMCNS

Melkite Archbishop Pierre Mouallem, Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill., head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah celebrate Mass in St. Catherine's Church in Bethlehem Jan. 24. The three were among church leaders from North America, Europe and the Holy Land participating in talks in support of Christians in the region.

of the church and that they have obligations of faith beyond their immediate community.

"The broad spectrum of issues that I will have to address goes well beyond the issues that are often identified as African-American concerns," he said. So, for instance, "when I speak out in support of justice for the immigrant community, be they Hispanic or Asian or South Pacific or European, I speak as a Catholic bishop, but I also speak as an African-American and we have a stake in those concerns."

African-American bishops reacted with pleasure to Bishop Gregory's election.

"Wilton is a great man, a great bishop," said Auxiliary Bishop Joseph N. Perry of Chicago.

"The fact that this is the first African-American bishop (to be president) wells up a lot of pride in all of us," Bishop Perry added. "I congratulate the bishops for recognizing his talents, his personal strength."

"What it means to me is that the church is really diverse in promoting leadership," said Bishop Curtis J. Guillery of Beaumont, Texas. "Bishop Gregory, of course, is well qualified."

Bishop Guillery added, "To have an African-American as the chairman of the bishops' conference sends a very positive image to the whole church in the United States, that the church is a very welcoming church, not just in the pews, but in leadership."

Father Peter Enyan-Boadu, pastor of the Rochester Diocese's Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Brockport, said he met with Bishop Gregory a number of times in 1988 when Father Enyan-Boadu was a priest-in-residence at Holy Angels Parish in Chicago. A colleague from the priest's home diocese of Obuasi in Ghana, Africa, Father Peter Amponsah, also pursued doctoral studies in Bishop Gregory's diocese of Belleville.

Father Enyan-Boadu said he also welcomed Bishop Gregory's election.

"It was really for many of us a recognition of how far black Catholics have come and, in general, a recognition of his good works," the priest said. Many blacks consider the Catholic Church a "white church," Father Enyan-Boadu said, but Bishop Gregory's selection highlights the fact that it is a church made up of different races.

In particular, he said, the election was positive news after the departure of such high-profile black Catholic clergy as Father George A. Stallings of Washington, D.C., who left the church to found his own Afrocentric congregation. Some other black clergy in recent years have struggled with remaining in the church due to the feeling that the church was not sensitive enough to black concerns, Father Enyan-Boadu added.

"This kind of thing is a big morale-booster to us in the Catholic faith," Father Enyan-Boadu said.

In his first presidential speech to the U.S. bishops following the election, Bishop Gregory forthrightly addressed both the promise his selection symbolized and the fact that, at the same time, it should be viewed with a sense of proportion.

"I do not want to diminish in any way the satisfaction and pride that African-American Catholics may feel in this or the intense privilege that I derive in being the first," he said. "I need, nonetheless, confess that I feel no great amazement that our conference would have chosen an African-American president."

Racism remains a sin that must be overcome, he said, but the church herself "remains a proud community of every nation and race, of every language and social class."

Family influences

Bishop Gregory was born into a non-Catholic family that was basically unchurched, although there was a history of appreciation for Catholicism. His maternal grandmother had become a Catholic when her parents enrolled her and her sister at St. Benedict the Moor boarding school in Milwaukee early in the century.

"It was one of the few boarding schools in the United States that would accept black kids at that time," he explained. His grandmother and great-aunt were baptized and made their first Communions, though they were not active in the faith.

"But my grandmother always spoke — always spoke — very, very positively about her Catholic faith, even though she didn't go to Mass," he said. When his family enrolled Bishop Gregory in a Catholic school beginning with sixth grade, the main reason was academic.

"Like a lot of inner-city parents, they were very concerned about the quality of education available in the public schools — even in the '50s," Bishop Gregory said. "They put us in Catholic school primarily to provide a good education. Obviously, the Catholic training and the Christian principles were good, but that wasn't the driving force. The driving force was to get a good education, which, I'm sure, is one of the main reasons inner-city parents choose Catholic schools, even today."

Whatever improvement it meant for the quality of his education, the "Catholic" influences at his school, St. Carthage, affected him dramatically. He decided a few weeks into the school year that he wanted to be a priest, which meant he had to become a Catholic first. By the end of that sixth-grade year, young Wilton had been baptized, received his first Communion and been confirmed.

Later, his mother, Ethel, and two sisters also became Catholic, though his father, Wilton D. Gregory Sr., never has done so, he said. His parents, now in their 90s, still live in Chicago.

Two years after becoming a Catholic, Wilton entered Chicago's Quigley Preparatory, a high school seminary. By the time he was 25, he was ordained a priest.

Broader profile

It was while serving as chairman of the bishops' Committee on Liturgy from 1990 to 1993 that Bishop Gregory began to develop a broader public profile than being one of a handful of African-American Catholic bishops. He adeptly led the bishops through a series of sometimes controversial endeavors, including changing holy days of obligation, adopting an English translation of the Sacramentary and approving a lectionary for children's Masses.

Shortly after his term as chairman of the liturgy committee ended, he was named to head the Diocese of Belleville, which was just emerging from a series of scandals that resulted in the removal of eight priests from their parishes amid allegations that they had sexually abused minors.

There he was credited with easing tensions and helping heal wounds. In a pastoral letter issued on the first anniversary of his installation in Belleville, he wrote that the church needs to speak honestly about the pain left by clergy sexual abuse of children.

People who work with Bishop Gregory in the Diocese of Belleville note that their boss seems to be happiest when he's around young people and that he makes a point of attending youth ministry events whenever possible. As a supervisor, they find him to be a good listener who hears out all sides before making decisions.

Although he's been active on various committees throughout his 18 years as a bishop, Bishop Gregory said he was surprised and flattered the first time he was among 10 bishops nominated to head the conference in 1995.

"I can remember opening the letter, I was overwhelmed," he said. "It was a sign of great affirmation. And I was very grateful."

When he was nominated again three years later and elected vice president, the experience was humbling, Bishop Gregory said. "I didn't know. Literally, I didn't have an inkling that that was in the works."

Until that election, he'd never envisioned himself being president of the conference, he said.

Now he hopes he's in this position for many reasons, from his work in the conference for 18 years to his fellow bishops' belief that he is fair and even-handed.

"Hopefully, it's because they think that I will be able to articulate the positions of the Catholic conference," he said. "Hopefully, it's because they believe I'm pretty much like most of the candidates who they've elected, someone who will bring some gifts and a particular vision."

Contributing to this story were Jerry Filteau and Mark Pattison of CNS, and Rob Cullinan in Rochester.

Healthy Retirement

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This special edition will profile senior citizens who have embraced the unique possibilities and challenges posed by "the golden years," with a special emphasis on health-related concerns. It will also explore such topics as financial planning and money management, travel, staying fit, and volunteering in church and community — providing an ideal environment in which to promote related programs and services.