

Pope accepts resignation of Cardinal Wuerl

Pope Francis accepted the resignation of Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl, archbishop of Washington, D.C., on Friday, Oct. 12.

The 77-year-old embattled traveled to Rome in September to ask Pope Francis to accept the resignation letter that he submitted almost three years ago upon reaching the customary retirement age of 75.

“It was clear that some decision, sooner rather than later, on my part is an essential aspect so that this archdiocesan Church we all love can move forward,” Cardinal Wuerl wrote in a Sept. 11 letter to the priests of his archdiocese.

Cardinal Wuerl has been the subject of withering criticism since a Pennsylvania grand jury report in mid-August accused him in some cases of reassigning priests who had been credibly accused of sexually abusing minors during his time as bishop of his hometown of Pittsburgh (1988-2006).

The Archdiocese of Washington shared a letter from Pope Francis the morning of Cardinal Wuerl’s resignation. In it, the pope praised the cardinal’s “nobility” in choosing to resign, saying “you make clear the intent to put God’s Project first, before any kind of personal project, including what could be considered as good for the Church. Your renunciation is a sign of your availability and docility to the Spirit who continues to act in his Church.”

Abuse controversy

The cardinal’s supporters have argued that he was an early leader on the issue of clergy sex abuse, and that he did as much as he could to remove dangerous individuals from ministry before the U.S. bishops’ 2002 Dallas Charter instituted new

norms and canonical tools.

“There are distortions and serious omissions in the grand jury report so that it incorrectly portrayed his record here. People who saw and were aware of what he did at the time understand that,” Ann Rodgers, director of communications for the Diocese of Pittsburgh, told Our Sunday Visitor. Rodgers formerly worked as a local newspaper reporter in Pittsburgh who covered the religion beat and Bishop Wuerl’s 18-year tenure in the Steel City.

But other observers counter that the question of whether Cardinal Wuerl should step down goes beyond his individual guilt or innocence in Pittsburgh. They argue he should resign because he was part of an episcopal establishment that failed to protect the Church’s most vulnerable members.

“I think about the damage that has occurred to the Church, so this is bigger than any specific case or reference in that grand jury report,” said Patricia McGuire, the president of Trinity Washington University, a Catholic university in Washington D.C. On her blog and in a recent interview with OSV, McGuire said Cardinal Wuerl should resign because his credibility as an archbishop has been compromised. By resigning, McGuire suggested that the cardinal would be displaying “a very serious and elegant act of leadership.”

“I think as the leader of the archdiocese and as an important leader in Church, he can play a very serious leadership role in expressing atonement for what’s happening and also to move the discussion to a different place by taking himself out of the picture and not making it about him,” McGuire said.

Before the Pennsylvania grand jury report, Cardinal Wuerl had built a reputation for being one of the few bishops who early on acted on the scourge of clergy sexual abuse. He removed some accused priests from ministry, and lobbied for some of the changes the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted in

2002. In one well-known case, then-Bishop Wuerl flew to Rome in 1993 to appeal a Vatican ruling that ordered him to reinstate Father Anthony J. Cipolla. The Vatican court later sided with then-Bishop Wuerl and Father Cipolla, who has since died, was kept out of ministry.

However, the grand jury documented other cases where accused priests in Pittsburgh were allowed to return to parish work. In one case, the report says then-Bishop Wuerl permitted one accused priest to be transferred to another diocese.

A considerable portion of arguments for and against Cardinal Wuerl splits along ideological lines, with conservatives calling for his dismissal and progressives defending him. But the anger has spilled out of the Catholic blogosphere and into the pews.

While Cardinal Wuerl celebrated Mass in early September, a man yelled, "Shame on you!" and walked out. A deacon assigned to the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington wrote a letter, later posted online, in which he called upon the cardinal to resign and added that he could no longer assist him as a deacon or master of ceremonies.

The Washington Post reported on a private meeting between Cardinal Wuerl and the priests of his archdiocese, some of whom reportedly advised him to step down and added that it was hard for them to believe that he had never heard the rumors about his predecessor, now-Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick, 88, who was removed from public ministry in June and resigned from the College of Cardinals in July amidst allegations that he had sexually abused seminarians and minors.

"What's moving (Cardinal Wuerl) is his priests telling him that he's lost credibility with them," McGuire said. "The deacon coming out and saying he wouldn't assist at Masses with him was stunning to me, and probably drove the point home very deeply."

Eventful career

Cardinal Wuerl's episcopal career appears to be ending in as much controversy as it began when he became an auxiliary bishop in Seattle in 1986.

In the mid 1980s, the issue was an irregular situation where then-Bishop Wuerl was given administrative responsibilities at the expense of the late Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, who had run afoul of the Vatican for some of his pastoral tendencies.

The archbishop regained his full authority the following year after appealing to a Vatican-appointed commission of three other U.S. bishops. For his part, Bishop Wuerl was sent back to his native Pittsburgh, where he was installed as the diocesan bishop in March 1988.

The Seattle situation "was, in everybody's words, unworkable," said Rodgers.

The controversial bookends to his life as a bishop contrast with what was otherwise a distinguished and accomplished career as a consummate churchman. He has served on a number of Vatican congregations, councils and commissions, as well as numerous national and international organizations such as the Papal Foundation and various committees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Born in Pittsburgh on Nov. 12, 1940, Wuerl was ordained a priest in 1966 and later served as secretary to Pittsburgh Bishop John Wright, even following him to Rome when the bishop was named head of the Vatican's clergy dicastery and made a cardinal. In this capacity, Wuerl attended the 1978 conclave that elected Pope St. John Paul II as an aide to the ailing Cardinal Wright.

Benedict XVI appointed him archbishop of Washington in 2006, upon the retirement of the now-disgraced McCarrick, who had

led the archdiocese since 2001. Pope Benedict elevated then-Archbishop Wuerl to the College of Cardinals in November 2010, shortly after Wuerl's 70th birthday.

Pope Benedict appointed Cardinal Wuerl to help direct the October 2012 Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith. Pope Francis appointed him as a member of the 2014 and 2015 Synods on the Family. Cardinal Wuerl hosted both popes in Washington, D.C., during their first pastoral visits to the United States.

Man of the Church

Cardinal Wuerl is an admirer and ardent supporter of three very different popes – St. John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis – and sought to incorporate their insights into his local Church.

“He thinks with the Church and he believes in his heart that the Holy Spirit works in the selection of popes,” Rodgers said. “So whoever is pope, he’s going look at that person and say, ‘How is the Spirit speaking to us through the Vicar of Christ?’”

“As a catechist, I think he really appreciated the precision of Pope Benedict’s language, and as a shepherd, he really appreciated the emphasis on the personal encounter of Pope Francis,” said Susan Timoney, an associate professor of pastoral studies at the Catholic University of America.

Timoney, who worked for several years in the Archdiocese of Washington as the secretary for pastoral ministry and social concerns, told OSV that Cardinal Wuerl was a natural “teaching bishop” who wrote several books, including the catechisms, “The Teaching of Christ” and “The Catholic Way.” She believes the cardinal’s lasting legacy will be his diocesan implementation of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis’ 2016 post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the pastoral care of

families.

“A number of dioceses across the world called to ask if they could use part or all of the plan,” Timoney said. “I hope people will give his legacy a fair reading, because he deserves that.”

Despite a personal formality that sometimes struck observers as aloofness, McGuire said she found Cardinal Wuerl to be self-effacing, humble, approachable and genuinely interested in people.

“He’s been a great archbishop and he’s been very kind to me and my institution,” McGuire said. “But this is about more than my personal affection for someone who’s been a good colleague and leader. The Church has been damaged. Whether people want to defend him or not for Pittsburgh, the Church has still been severely damaged.”

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