

Washington archbishop defends criticism of Trump's visit to JPII National Shrine

Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Washington, D.C., likened the criticism he received this week for concerns he raised about [President Donald Trump's visit to the St. John Paul II National Shrine](#) to what priests and religious sisters who marched for civil rights in the 1960s were told.

"People said, 'Oh, you shouldn't be in the political arena. You should be at church,'" Archbishop Gregory said Friday during a virtual panel discussion on racism hosted by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life.

Archbishop Gregory, one of four black Catholic panelists, said such criticisms miss the point that the Church "lives in society," and that Pope Francis has called Catholics to go beyond the four walls of their churches and proclaim the Gospel in the world.

In the process, Archbishop Gregory said the Church "needs to remember" that closely aligning itself with a political party weakens its prophetic witness.

"There's no political party completely aligned with the Church's social justice teachings, the teaching of the Gospel," the archbishop said. "When you get too close to any one party, you lose the capacity to speak the Gospel truth to everyone."

The archbishop came under fire from some quarters for a statement Tuesday in which he criticized the St. John Paul II National Shrine for allowing the presidential visit amid racial unrest in the nation's streets and concerns with

Trump's response to the protests.

"I find it baffling and reprehensible that any Catholic facility would allow itself to be so egregiously misused and manipulated in a fashion that violates our religious principles, which call us to defend the rights of all people even those with whom we might disagree," the archbishop said in prepared remarks Tuesday.

The shrine, which is operated by the Knights of Columbus, said White House officials had originally scheduled the president's visit "as an event for the president to sign an executive order related to global religious freedom."

In Friday's virtual dialogue, Archbishop Gregory noted that the day before the shrine hosted Trump, authorities had fired flash-bang rounds, gas and rubber bullets to disperse a crowd of protestors from Lafayette Park across from the White House. The protestors seemingly were moved so the president could walk across the street to St. John Episcopal Church, which had been set on fire during protests the night before.

The church's rector later told reporters that police had forcibly moved her and other clergy off St. John Church's premises, where the president held a Bible in his hand for a photo-op.

"I said, 'This is awful.' This is the use of a sacred place, a sacred symbolic place, to be used as a political ploy, and I didn't think it was appropriate, especially at the Pope John Paul II shrine, because (the pope) was a man of incredible concern about the dignity of human beings," Archbishop Gregory said.

"That shrine is a holy place because of the man it honors. It should not have been used as a place for a political statement," the archbishop added.

In a statement following Trump's visit, the shrine highlighted

the signing of an executive order advancing international religious freedom. "This was fitting given St. John Paul II was a tireless advocate of religious liberty throughout his pontificate," the statement said. "International religious freedom receives widespread bipartisan support, including unanimous passage of legislation in defense of persecuted Christians and religious minorities around the world.

"The shrine welcomes all people to come and pray and learn about the legacy of St. John Paul II," it added.

Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.