

## **Praying apart isn't the same as praying together. That's why we sued D.C.**

By Cardinal Wilton Gregory

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A year that has taken so many we love from us in suffering, sickness and death will soon be coming to an end. We are grateful for the skill and determination of those who have worked so diligently to discover effective treatments and to create a vaccine, as well as all the front-line workers who keep us safe and perform so many essential functions. Their efforts have created untold and tangible hope in a moment of darkness and challenge.

As people of faith and goodwill, we often strive to maintain our hope in the face of difficulty in our lives. In this season of Advent, we may also be searching for reasons to rejoice and reasons to be grateful.

I am particularly grateful to our Catholic community and our dedicated priests, teachers, staff and lay leaders who have accompanied our people in prayer as we work together to love and care for each other. This is the charge to which we are called, despite the presence of all kinds of evil, including racism, injustice and inequalities that existed before this pandemic and have only intensified since. I am grateful for the work of Catholic Charities and the outreach ministries of all of our parishes.

Since arriving in Washington from Atlanta 20 months ago, I have found a richly diverse community of deep faith and many dedicated citizens working in all facets of our government, education and the private sector. Washingtonians are connected in their common desire for a better tomorrow, regardless of where they are from, their economic status or their particular faith tradition.

When the pandemic arrived in early spring, we joined the efforts to slow the spread of this terrible virus. While the stay-at-home orders were in place, we suspended public Mass and switched to virtual services. Once these orders were lifted, we gradually returned to in-person Mass, with many new precautions to keep people safe as they pray and worship: requiring that masks be worn at all times, limiting seating to every other pew, maintaining six feet between worshippers, creating new traffic patterns to maintain social distancing, additional sanitizing and the like.

We appreciate that our local officials have had to make difficult decisions in the face of unprecedented challenges.

But praying apart is not the same as praying together. We recently brought legal action to protect the free exercise of religion in the nation's capital. This was a last resort, as we could no longer bear the burden of turning away the faithful from Mass due to D.C.'s 50-person cap on religious services

when big-box stores, retailers, and even liquor stores and many other venues continued to operate without similar limits. The right of the faithful to assemble for religious services is one of our most cherished constitutional legacies, and we maintain it should be treated as an “essential” activity — just as D.C. regards shopping and so many other activities as essential. We simply ask that religious worship be treated in the same way so that we may continue to worship together and serve those in need. (D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser subsequently eased the 50-person cap on Dec. 16.)

We trust that our local authorities will act prudently in crafting policies that benefit the health and safety of our communities, while recognizing that the public welfare is served when people of faith gather to worship, pray and receive spiritual nourishment — particularly in times of crisis. We continue to pray that officials’ decisions will be guided by wisdom and charity.

In a year of social distancing, we have all faced isolation in some form. It is my hope that the Christmas season will draw Christians closer to Jesus, and that all people of goodwill continue to come together to support each other during these challenging times.

May this season of hope and joy fill our hearts with gladness and renewal.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/cardinal-wilton-gregory-dc-covid-church-suit/2020/12/21/1b5fe268-43be-11eb-b0e4-0f182923a025\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/cardinal-wilton-gregory-dc-covid-church-suit/2020/12/21/1b5fe268-43be-11eb-b0e4-0f182923a025_story.html)