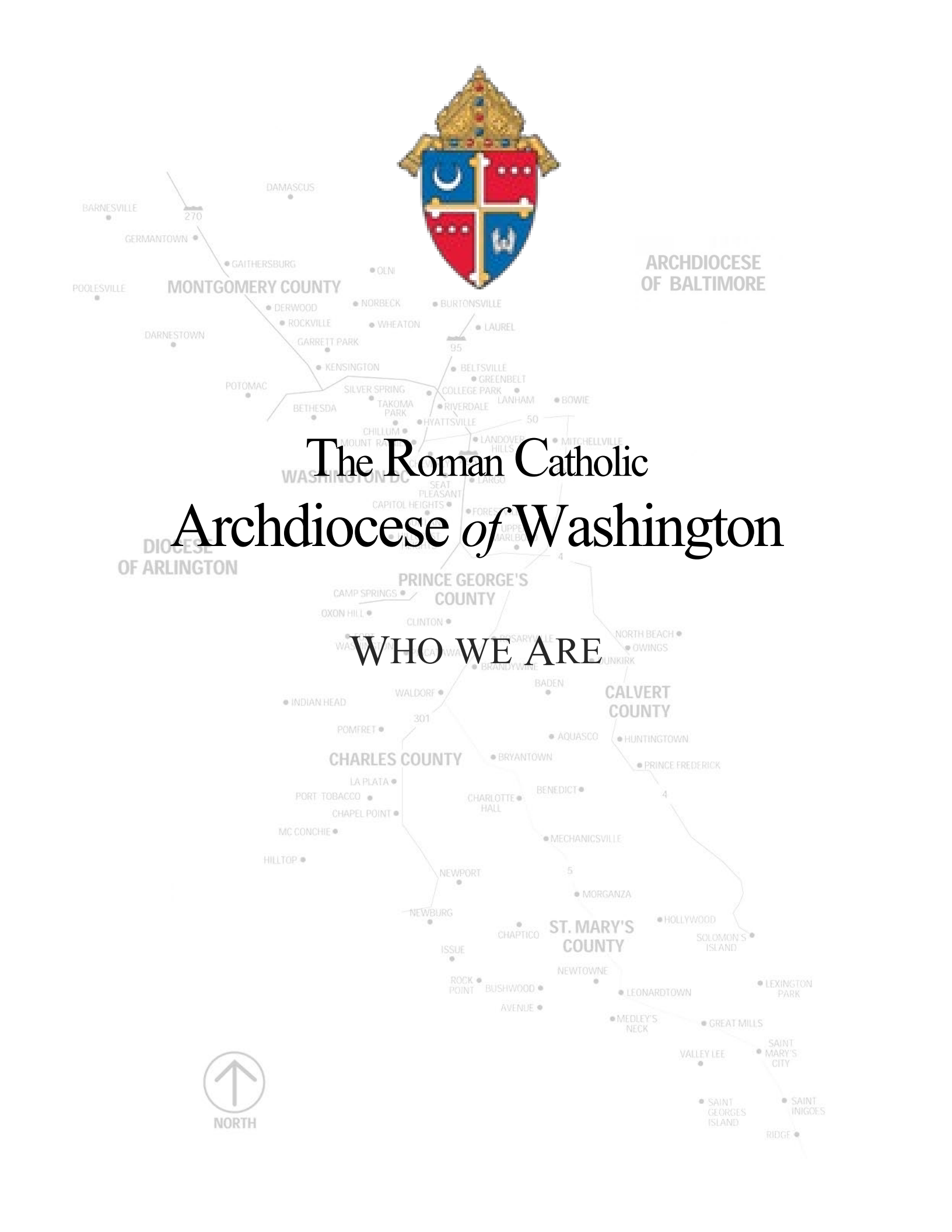


The Roman Catholic
Archdiocese *of* Washington

WHO WE ARE

Map of the Archdiocese of Washington



History of The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington

The history of the Catholic Church in the Washington D.C. region can be traced back to the first settlers of the colony of Maryland who had traversed the ocean on two small ships, the Ark and the Dove, and landed in Maryland on Annunciation Day, March 25, 1634. On that day, Jesuit Father Andrew White also celebrated the first Mass held in the English-speaking colonies on St. Clement's Island, in modern day St. Mary's County.

Maryland was founded as a haven for religious toleration. In 1649, the Maryland Toleration Act was enacted, the first legislation enacted for religious freedom in America. However, within a few short years, the Catholic presence in Maryland was overthrown and suppressed. Religious freedom as it been in Maryland for most of the seventeenth century was abolished. Catholics were barred from public office and harassed by the courts and other legal authorities. In 1704, all Catholic chapels and schools were ordered closed by the Maryland Council.

Two years later, in 1706, after lobbying from prominent Catholics in England, Queen Anne gave permission for Mass to be offered in private homes in Maryland. This action allowed for the continuance of the Catholic faith privately. The use of private house chapels instead a freestanding churches defined the life of the priests and lay people in Maryland for nearly a century. Commonly referred to as the circuit rides, priests would spend their time traveling between one or more private homes and chapels. Many of these private chapels continued to exist after the subsequent establishment of the Diocese of Baltimore in 1789, which then encompassed the entirety of the new nation of the United States. Several became the sites of parishes that still exist today within the Archdiocese of Washington.

John Carroll, a Jesuit priest who was born in Upper Marlboro, was appointed the first Bishop of Baltimore overseeing all the Catholic priests and churches in the fledgling nation. In 1808, Baltimore was raised to an Archdiocese with the creation of the new Dioceses of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Bardstown (Kentucky) by Pope Pius VII. More dioceses would be created throughout the nineteenth century as the United States expanded west.

With the Catholic faith being present in this region since 1634, the Archdiocese of Washington includes many historic parishes. For example, St. Francis Xavier Parish in Newtowne dates to 1640. Its authentically renovated church, built in 1731, is the oldest Catholic church in the 13 original colonies. Other historic parishes include Holy Trinity Parish in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, established in 1791; and St. Patrick Parish, founded in 1794. In 1865, a group of freed slaves founded St. Augustine Parish, the first predominately black Catholic parish in the District. Sacred Heart Chapel in Bowie, Maryland was established in 1741. This chapel is significant in U.S. Catholic history because it was the meeting place for the Jesuit Fathers and John Carroll, S.J., which led to his election as the first American bishop on May 18, 1789.

The Archdiocese of Washington, originally encompassing only the city of Washington, D.C., was created out of a portion of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in 1939 by a decree of Pope Pius XII. Archbishop of Baltimore Michael Curley became the Archbishop of

Baltimore-Washington. His Excellency was an outspoken defender of the Church and advocate for Catholic education and the disadvantaged. He also joined efforts to overturn racial discrimination laws and encouraged segregated parishes to welcome African Americans.

Upon Archbishop Curley's death in 1947, the Archdiocese was expanded to include the Maryland counties of Calvert, Charles, Montgomery, Prince George's and St. Mary's, and then-Msgr. Patrick A. O'Boyle, then the Director of Catholic War Relief Services since 1941, was named the first resident Archbishop of Washington. Created a cardinal in 1967, he is remembered as a champion of social justice, civil rights, and being a staunch defender of the faith, especially in the wake of controversies surrounding Humanae Vitae, when more than 50 priests and theologians within the Archdiocese dissented.

Upon his installation, then-Archbishop O'Boyle immediately began work to desegregate Catholic schools, long before the Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of public schools in Brown v. Board of Education, and began to build many new parishes and schools made necessary by the rapid growth of the area after World War II. He worked closely with the Catholic Interracial Council of Washington and in 1963 created the Office of Urban Renewal to assist in justice work within the District of Columbia. Because of his work, then-Archbishop O'Boyle was invited to give the invocation at the Lincoln Memorial during the 1963 March on Washington.

The turmoil that world saw in 1968 was particularly felt in the Archdiocese. The April 4 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was followed by days of rioting that left large sections of the District destroyed. Cardinal O'Boyle dedicated the whole of the Annual Archdiocesan Appeal for that year to assist in rebuilding the devastated neighborhoods. Cardinal O'Boyle retired in 1973, and during his tenure as the longest serving Archbishop of Washington, 46 new parishes were opened and he oversaw the construction of over 300 other buildings.

Archbishop William W. Baum, previously Bishop of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, succeeded Cardinal O'Boyle in 1973 and is remembered as a theologian and for his work toward Christian unity and social harmony. He spoke out strongly in defense of human life and worked to nurture and sustain the Gospel with all its radical demands. Created a Cardinal in May 1976, he continued the social and racial justice efforts of the Archdiocese and created the Secretariat of Black Catholics and the Secretariat of Spanish Catholics in 1974 to look to the temporal and spiritual needs of these populations. Cardinal Baum welcomed Pope John Paul II on his first apostolic journey to the United States in 1979. He was called to Rome in 1980, where he served as Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education and then as Major Penitentiary of the Apostolic Penitentiary from 1990 until his retirement in 2001.

The fourth Archbishop of Washington, James A. Hickey, was a Michigan native who served as Rector of the North American College in Rome. Under his 20 years of pastoral leadership from 1980-2000, the Archdiocese greatly expanded service ministries for the poor, establishing programs such as Victory Housing, the Birthing and Care program, and the Archdiocesan Health Care and Legal Networks. He also invited Saint Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity to the Archdiocese where they founded Gift of Peace convent to care for terminal patients with AIDS.

Created a cardinal in 1988, his achievements also include his work for the renewal of Catholic education, his efforts to defend and protect the Catholic identity of local institutions, and his efforts to advance social justice. In 1986, he notably led the way in establishing child protection policies and procedures, being one of the first U.S. bishops to recognize the seriousness of clergy sexual abuse of children. He also established a permanent home for the offices of the Archdiocese in Hyattsville, Maryland. He also created 12 new parishes, four pastoral missions and two schools during the Archdiocese's largest building boom in decades as the Archdiocese grew in diversity, with Mass celebrated in 22 languages, including Chinese, French, Korean, Polish, Portuguese and Vietnamese. In November 2000, Cardinal Hickey retired.

Theodore McCarrick served as Archbishop from 2001 to 2006.

The sixth Archbishop of Washington, Donald Cardinal Wuerl, previously Bishop of Pittsburgh, was installed in 2006. Created a cardinal in 2010, a primary focus of his episcopal leadership was the renewal of faith; revitalization and strengthening of Catholic education, parishes and local ministries; and the New Evangelization. This latter work of encounter, witness, invitation, welcoming, and accompaniment emphasized sharing the Gospel with others with renewed conviction, determination, and enthusiasm, particularly engagement with those who were disaffected, and encouraging them in an encounter with the love of Jesus Christ. In October 2012, Cardinal Wuerl served as Relator General of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization in October 2012.

Cardinal Wuerl is remembered for his catechetical and teaching ministry, and being a strong promotor of religious liberty, the Catholic identity of the faithful and Church institutions, and the inviolability and dignity of all human life. He authored several pastoral letters, regular newspaper columns and online blog postings, and several books. He welcomed Pope Benedict XVI in April 2008, and Pope Francis in September 2015, during their apostolic journeys to Washington, D.C. In conjunction with the celebration of the Archdiocese's 75th anniversary in 2014, Cardinal Wuerl convoked the first archdiocesan synod which consisted of many listening sessions with the Catholic faithful who made more than 15,000 recommendations for action on the issues of worship, Catholic education, community, service, stewardship, and administration. Anniversary celebrations also included a Mass on St. Clement's Island, as well as at the restored brick chapel in St. Mary's County. Another particular point of personal pride was his opening of the Saint John Paul II Seminary, a college-level house of priestly formation.

The seventh Archbishop of Washington, Wilton Gregory, previously Archbishop of Atlanta, succeeded Cardinal Wuerl in 2019. His Eminence shepherded the Archdiocese through the challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic, and he also confront the clergy sex abuse crisis with healing, transparency, and restoring trust. Cardinal Gregory's leadership further included launching a Laudato Si' action plan, welcoming and inclusion in ministry for people with disabilities, and he was tireless in speaking out against racism. He also oversaw the local archdiocesan synod process as part of the 2021-24 Synod of Bishops on Synodality: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission."

The current Archbishop of Washington, formerly Bishop of San Diego, is Cardinal Robert McElroy, who was installed in March 2025. In his time leading the Archdiocese, he has been an outspoken voice for the dignity of immigrants and refugees who have been subjected to inhumane treatment by federal officials, for the end of unjustified and morally illegitimate military action, and for practices of welcoming and inclusion for people who are on the peripheries and an end of social denigration and polarization. His Eminence has also encouraged the clergy, religious, employees, and faithful of the Archdiocese to help seize opportunities for improvement and pastoral growth.

From the very beginning, Cardinal McElroy adopted a synodal and collaborative approach, which, following consultation with the faithful throughout the Archdiocese, led to the development in late 2025 of certain goals for pastoral action in parishes, schools, and social service agencies, which are particularly needed in our time. These include:

• Foster a Parish Culture which Piercingly Invites People to a Personal Encounter with Jesus Christ;

• Provide Formation which Deepens the Sacramental Life of the Church;

• Celebrate and Evangelize Marriage and Family Life;

• Formation of the Laity as Missionary Disciples;

• Care for the Vulnerable: Migrants, the Unborn and the Marginalized; and

• Reverse the Avalanche of Young People Leaving the Church.

Today, the Archdiocese of Washington is home to over 680,000 Catholics. Its 92 Catholic schools educate approximately 66,000 children while service agencies, including Catholic Charities and Victory Housing, have made the archdiocese one of the largest private social service providers in the region. Catholics are finding new opportunities to deepen their faith through parish formation, evangelization efforts, and small faith communities. Although diverse in nationality, they share a common faith and a commitment to reflect Christ in the world through prayer, education and service.

Statistical Profile of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington

(Data drawn from 2025 Official Catholic Directory)

Personnel					
Cardinals	1	*Professional Ministry Personnel:*		High Schools, Private	16
Retired Cardinals	1	Brothers	2	Total Students	9,119
Auxiliary Bishops	3	Sisters	28	Elementary Schools. Diocesan and Parish	52
Retired Bishops	1	**Welfare**		Total Students	14,090
Abbots	1	Catholic Hospitals	3	Elementary Schools, Private	7
Priest,: Diocesan Active in Diocese	187	Total Assisted	415,198	Total Students	2,192
Priests: Diocesan Active Outside Diocese	17	Health Care Cenlers	71	Non-residential schools for the Disabled	1
Priests: Diocesan i n Foreign Missions	4	Total Assisted	1,341,589	Total Students	44
Priests: Retired, Sick or Absent	69	Homes for the Aged	29	*Catechesis Religious Education:*	
Number of Diocesan Priests	277	Total Assisted	2,712	High School Students	1 ,522
Religious Priests in Diocese	296	Day Care Centers	13	Elementary Students	15,84 I
I'otal Priests in your Diocese	573	Total Assisted	826	Total Students under Catholic I nstruction	72,569
Extern Priest in Diocese	151	Specialized Homes	20	'l'eathers in Diocese:	
Ordinations:		Total Assistled	13,415	Priests	44
Diocesan Priests	6	Special Centers for Socio! Services	65	Brothers	121
Religious Priests	15	Total Assisted	242,598	Sisters	148
Transitiona l Deacons	16	Residential Care of Disabled	6	Lay Teachers	3,592
Permnent Dcacons	12	Total Assisted	112	**Vital Statistics**	
Permanent Deacons in Diocese	205	Other lnstilutions	12	Receptions into the Church:	
Tot.al Brothers	209	Total Assisted	2,127	Infant Baptism Totals	5,156
Total Sisters	371	**Educational**		Minor Baptism Totals	733
Parishes		Seminaries Diocesan	3	Adult Baptism Total	143
Parishes	140	Students from 'l'his Diocese	35	Received into Full Communion	560
With Residenit Pastor:		Students from Other Dioceses.	67	FirsL Communions	489
Resident Diocesan Priests	112	Diocesan Students in OUler Seminaries	34	Confirmations	4,596
Resident Religious Prit!sts	15	Seminaries, Religious	13	Marriages:	
Wilhout Resident. Pastor:		Students, Religious	138	Catholic	1,151
Administered by Priests	13	Total Seminarians	207	I nterfaith	363
Missions	9	Colleges and Universities	3	Total Marriages	1,514
Pastoral Centers	1	Total Students	28,787	Deaths	2,691
New Parishes Created	1	High Schools, Diocesan and Parish	2	Total Catholic Population	671,187
		Total Students	767	Total Population	3,050,847

Archbishop of Washington

His Eminence Robert Cardinal McElroy





Ordained to the Priesthood
April 2, 1980

Ordained Auxiliary Bishop of San Francisco
September 7, 2010

Installed Sixth Bishop of San Diego
April 15, 2015

On May 29, 2022, Pope Francis named Bishop McElroy and nineteen other new cardinals from around the world. McElroy was elevated by Pope Francis to the College of Cardinals in an August 27,22 consistory in Rome.

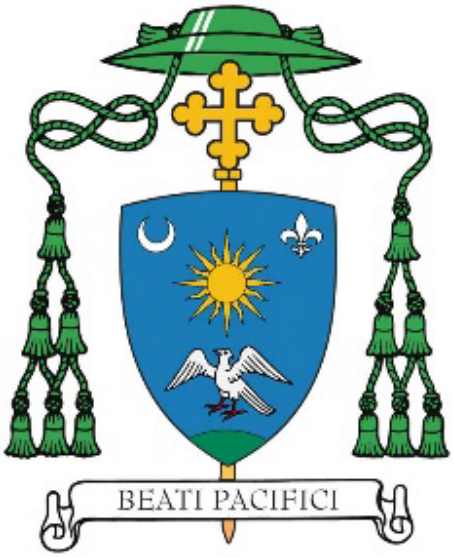
Named Eighth Archbishop of Washington
January 6, 2025

Installed Archbishop of Washington
March 11, 2025

Auxiliary Bishops of Washington



Bishop Juan R. Esposito-Garcia



Auxiliary Bishops of Washington



Bishop Gary R. Studniewski



Auxiliary Bishops of Washington



Bishop Robert Boxie III



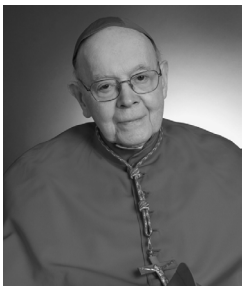
Former Archbishops of Washington



Most Rev. Michael J. Curley
1939-1947



Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle
1948 -1973



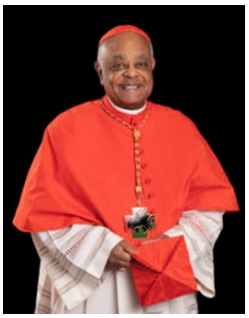
William Cardinal Baum
1973-1980



James Cardinal Hickey
1980-2000



Donald Cardinal Wuerl
2006-2019



Wilton Cardinal Gregory
2019-2025