

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

DONALD W. WUERL

ARCHBISHOP OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

Of German descent, Archbishop Wuerl was born on November 12, 1940, in Pittsburgh, where he attended St. Mary-of-the-Mount Parish and School. Then he studied at the Athenaeum of Ohio in Cincinnati before going to Rome in 1963 to study at the Pontifical Gregorian University and the Pontifical North American College. He was ordained to the priesthood on December 17, 1966, at St. Peter's Basilica.

Upon his return home in 1967, he began his career as part-time assistant pastor at St. Rosalia Parish in Pittsburgh's Greenfield neighborhood, and as part-time secretary to Pittsburgh's then-Bishop John Wright, who was created cardinal by Pope Paul VI in 1969.

That same year, when His Holiness appointed Wright prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, Wuerl continued to be Wright's full-time secretary in Rome until the cardinal's death in 1979.

How old were you when you first felt your vocation?

ARCHBISHOP DONALD WUERL: In elementary school, but it wasn't until high school that my calling became clear to me and that I took it seriously. After graduation, I entered the seminary to test whether I really had a vocation or not.

Do you have brothers and sisters?

DONALD WUERL: Yes, but they didn't feel called to religious life.

Other priests in your family?

DONALD WUERL: Not to my knowledge.

In 1974 you received your doctorate from the Angelicum University here in Rome. What was the title of your doctoral thesis?

DONALD WUERL: *The Ministerial Priesthood and the Third Synod of Bishops* in 1971.

Yesterday you said that in the archdiocese of Washington, D.C., Mass is celebrated in over 20 languages. Your Italian is perfect; what other languages do you speak?

In 1980 Wuerl requested to return to pastoral ministry in Pittsburgh, where he was rector of St. Paul's Seminary from 1981-1985. He was consecrated bishop on January 6, 1986 at St. Peter's Basilica by Pope John Paul II and was the 11th bishop of Pittsburgh from 1988 until his joyous installation as the 6th archbishop of Washington, D.C., on June 22, 2006, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

On April 4, 2008, he delivered the First Annual Pope John Paul II Lecture on Interreligious Understanding, sponsored by his alma mater, the Angelicum University, and the Russell

Berrie Foundation. The lecture was entitled "Unifying Religious Threads that Provide a Common Ground for Peace." The next afternoon, in the library of the Pontifical North American College, he spoke with Lucy Gordan about his vocation, studies, pastoral work, and Pope Benedict XVI's upcoming visit to the United States.



DONALD WUERL: Let me put it this way. I celebrate Mass in Spanish too. I can and have celebrated Mass as well as read a homily in French. However, I don't speak either language.

When was the first time you came to Rome?

DONALD WUERL: In 1963 Bishop Wright sent me to study at the Pontifical Gregorian University. The experience of

studying in Rome, in the shadow of St. Peter's, made me feel my formation as a priest was directly guided by the first vicar of Rome.

It also must have been very stimulating to be studying for the priesthood in Rome during the Second Vatican Council.

DONALD WUERL: Yes, indeed. I look back with nostalgia on those years. We seminarians sensed that we were direct observers, eyewitnesses of a marvelous reblossoming of the Church, of a renewed dedication and commitment that would be the basis of our ministry. Frequently over lunch Bishop Wright would explain to us that, anchored to the

past, this renewal was a continuation of the Church's traditions and that all the delegates were gathered around their vicar Pope Paul VI, the successor of Peter, as the Apostles had been around St. Peter himself.

We learned that we would concelebrate the Mass and in our mother tongues. For me probably the most moving experience of the Council was attending its closing Mass, listening to Pope Paul VI proclaim the Council's decrees.

Was Bishop, later Cardinal, Wright your mentor?

DONALD WUERL: I would like to think that there were many, many priests who've influenced my life and my ministry. Certainly Cardinal Wright was a very powerful influence.

The first such influence was Father Joseph Bryan, a priest at St. Mary-of-the-Mount during my high school years. He was very influential in my discerning a vocation to the priesthood. I not only came to know him, but came to try and envision myself as a priest like him. Father Joseph was key in my formation as a priest.

Wright was considered one of America's most articulate theologians and a convinced ecumenist. He attended the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) during which he was a driving force behind several of its documents. In 1969, when Pope Paul VI appointed him the prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, he became the highest-ranking American in the Curia. What did you learn from him?

DONALD WUERL: Having served with Cardinal Wright for so long, of course, he had a strong impact on my priestly ministry.

Does your strong support of ecumenism stem from Cardinal Wright's guidance?

DONALD WUERL: That would certainly be one aspect stemming from his guidance. However, during the Second Vatican Council Wright was greatly involved in increasing the role of the laity in Church life, something I also found to be a significant new development, focus of activity, in the life of the Church. So I would attribute to Wright, among others, recognition of the role of the laity in the Church as well as the interfaith and ecumenical outreach that has since been such an essential part of Church life and my ministry.

Would you agree that ecumenism is a form of intellectual curiosity and desire to learn about others?

DONALD WUERL: I think that at the heart of ecumenism is the desire to be one. The Church that Christ established he established as one, his body, not divided up into parts. So

I believe the real motivating, energizing, driving force behind ecumenism is the desire to have that wound of division healed. Then this ecumenical effort comes about by our coming to know each other better, by our coming to understand each other, to respect one another, and to work together.

It was announced yesterday that at his request His Holiness will visit an Orthodox synagogue in New York. Any comments?

DONALD WUERL: I see it as a sign of his desire to continue the dialogue between Catholics and Jews.

Yesterday in your lecture you talked about spiritual spaces—places for prayer and communicating with God; do you have a favorite spiritual space, a favorite church?

DONALD WUERL: Now, while it may not strike people as a particularly quiet place, every time I come to Rome, I make it a point to visit St. Peter's Basilica. First because Peter is buried there; secondly, because I was ordained a priest there, and thirdly, because I was ordained a bishop there, so for me it's a place of spiritual renewal. Even a brief visit can be a mini-retreat. In the Blessed Sacrament Chapel you can always find a quiet space. I love to go back there.

Yesterday you also referred to Pope John Paul II as "John Paul the Great." In my interview of Peter Cardinal Erdö ("My Mission is Reconciliation and the Renewal of Faith," *Inside the Vatican*, October 2006), to my question: "How do you think history will judge Pope John Paul II, 'The Instinctive,' 'The Great,' 'The Charismatic,' or 'The Conservative'?", without hesitation he answered: "The Great." Can you share one of your special memories of His Holiness with us?

DONALD WUERL: I have a lot of wonderful memories, but one of the things that I carry in my heart is that every time we would go to the *ad limina* (Latin for "to the threshold") visit—every bishop has to go every five years and make a report on his diocese—John Paul II would ask me to carry back his blessing to the people in my diocese. On one occasion he even took my hand and said: "With all my heart I give you my blessing to take back home." I was just so touched...

In your hometown of Pittsburgh, where you served as bishop for 18 years, you were nicknamed "the teaching bishop," and in your homily at your installation as archbishop of Washington, you said that you planned to be



“the voice of the great teaching tradition rooted in God’s Word and God’s wisdom”; so would you define yourself a teacher?

DONALD WUERL: The role of the priest, and therefore of the bishop, has always been described as threefold: to teach, to lead, and to sanctify. However, at different moments in history there’s perhaps more need to emphasize one or another of those three simultaneously active responsibilities. I believe this is a period of time in the life of the Church when teaching the faith is the priority.

By inclination I’m also very comfortable with this priority. Teaching for me is a high, high, priority as I try to live out my ministry as a bishop.

A priest by definition is the spiritual leader of his flock. In response to the command, “If you love me, feed my sheep,” he is to feed his flock, nurture his sheep. How does he do that? By teaching the Word of God and by celebrating the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. So the priest is shepherd, teacher, and sanctifier.

Would it be fair to say then that you as bishop have always spread the faith, dealt with daily challenges, and inspired church attendance and vocations through teaching, even if as with Jesus, not everybody always follows your guidance and advice?

DONALD WUERL: Absolutely.

It must have been a *tour de force* to organize the upcoming papal visit to Washington and New York; yet with only ten days to go you are here in Rome. Are you here to finalize the arrangements?

DONALD WUERL: I’m here for the Council for the Synod of Bishops. At the last Synod, the one on the Eucharist, the bishops of the Synod elected 12 bishops to be the permanent council that works on the preparations for the next Synod. I’m on the permanent council and that’s the main reason I’m here in Rome now.

So although I didn’t come to Rome specifically to make last-minute arrangements, I’ve been able to use my visit here as an opportunity to meet with members of the Curia,

like the Pope’s master of ceremonies and others, who have been responsible for organizing the visit from this side of the Atlantic.

Who has been your contact here in the Curia? Did you ever discuss plans in person with His Holiness?

DONALD WUERL: The Pope’s master of ceremonies, Monsignor Guido Marini. I went over with him and the others one more time any questions they had that I might be able to answer. The arrangements for such a trip are always ongoing. There is an advance team, but I don’t think their names are published.

No, I never discussed plans with His Holiness. His desires are handled indirectly by us through his representatives, including Marini.

I know that Pope John Paul II came to the United States seven times as pontiff and Benedict XVI came at least five times as cardinal, but how do you go about organizing such a visit? Some choices, like meeting with President Bush or officiating at Mass in St. Patrick’s, are obligatory or fairly obvious, but what about choosing the other venues?

DONALD WUERL: As far as Washington is concerned, it was pretty well determined from our initial conversations that the Holy Father would use his time there as an opportunity to really speak to the Church in the United States. So, he’ll discharge his first responsibility which is to the host government and go visit with the president, but that same afternoon he’ll visit with all the bishops of the United States. He’ll go with them to the National Shrine, an appropriate place because it’s the country’s Shrine.

The next day—his 81st birthday, by the way—he’ll hold Mass at Nationals Park stadium and we’ve invited people from all over the country. Right now we have almost 1,400 priests concelebrating that Mass. I’m told that’s the largest number of priests who concelebrated Mass with a Pope during a papal visit to the United States. The reason the number is so high is that these priests will come from all over the country. We’re also going to host tens of thousands of faithful at that Mass. We tried to make tickets available to Catholics all over the United States because we’re trying to make this visit truly reflective of the Church in the United States.

Then that afternoon the Pope will go to Catholic University to speak not just to that university, although it’s appropriate as the focal point since it’s the bishops’ university. His Holiness has invited the presidents of every Catholic college and university in the United States and the superintendents of Catholic education in every diocese to meet with him there.

So, you see, this papal visit is really a national event. His mission on this trip is to visit the American Catholic Church and open a dialogue.

Will he address the issues of pedophile priests?

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DONALD WUERL: I would think so since his mission is to introduce himself to the American Catholic Church, which has been so badly damaged by this scandal and the consequent life-long scars it's left over the years on the lives of so many innocent children and adolescents. I feel sure His Holiness will condemn this monstrous breach of trust.

Unfortunately this terrible abuse happened. The American Church affronted it, has tried to make amends and has established screening procedures of potential priests so that it won't happen in the future.

You joke about finding 81 candles for His Holiness's birthday cake on April 16th, but what has really been the most complicated event to organize and why?

DONALD WUERL: In Washington, organizing the Mass in Nationals Park stadium, because the ballpark wasn't finished until two weeks ago. In spite of tremendous support from the builders, the fact is the stadium was still under construction as we were making plans.

Is this the event then that you are most proud of?

DONALD WUERL: Yes, and it's the one the archdiocese and I are directly responsible for. Just to give you an idea of the complications, we're having chairs on the field. A ballpark isn't designed to have chairs on the field, so we had to invent a system of ticketing for those seating arrangements. All the necessary special permissions to allow for such a large attendance were not in place until the last week of March. Only then were we able to deliver all the 45,000 tickets, each in a separate envelope addressed to every individual recipient.

His Eminence Edward Cardinal Egan will be coming to Washington obviously to attend the Mass with all the other American bishops in the National Shrine; will you be going to New York?

DONALD WUERL: Yes.

When you are in Washington, how do you as an archbishop balance spiritual leadership and politics? In other words, how do you remain pastor to public officials whose political stands oppose Catholic teachings? I'm thinking of John Kerry, also a personal friend of yours, who supports abortion, and Nancy Pelosi, who supports both abortion and same-sex marriages. In the same vein, how do you keep from publicly endorsing Catholic politicians like Ted Kennedy?

DONALD WUERL: One of the things we have to keep in mind is that every one of these politicians who comes to Washington for work has his or her bishop back home in his

constituency. That bishop, not me, is his or her principal shepherd, pastor.

During their terms of office I try to discharge my responsibilities by teaching, by explaining over and over again the teachings of the Church. I try to help Catholic politicians form their conscience so that they apply my teaching to their own lives and when they act politically. As we touched on before, Jesus didn't stop teaching when people didn't heed his sermons. Let's say I try to persuade by teaching, not by punishing.

So are you saying then that, just as in Christ's teachings, there are some tenets that you are trying to teach that these politicians will accept and others that they will discard?

DONALD WUERL: You can't live your life that way. The teachings of the Church are a unity. You take the whole thing. You can't select what you're going to follow and what you are not going to follow. What happens is, as people begin to prioritize and weigh how they are going to live their lives, how they are going to follow the teachings of the Church, some elements become more important to them than others. We the clergy want to make sure that the ordering of what's most important is the same for the politicians as it is for the Church. The Church says life issues are the primary issues. You want to have the Catholic faithful understand that and say, "Yes, that's right, and I have to direct my life that way as well."

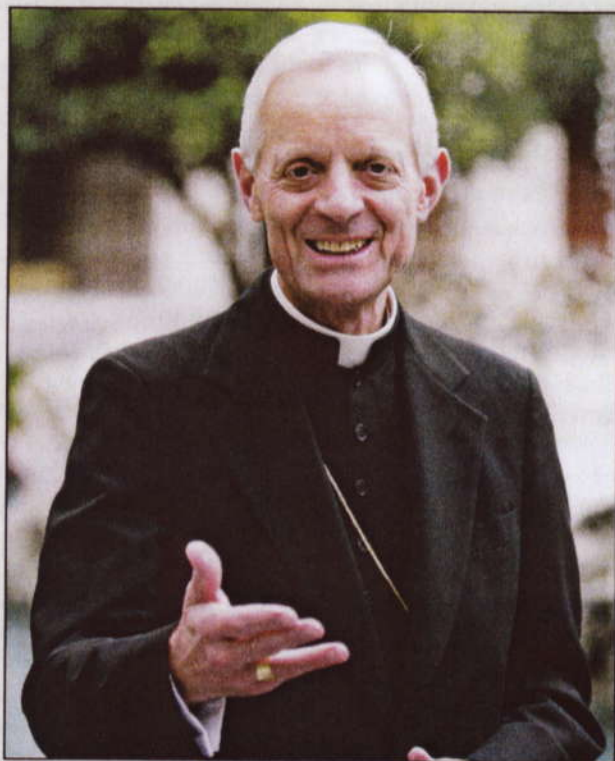
Then how do you deal with the politicians who profess the Catholic faith, but support birth control and legal abortion?

DONALD WUERL: Many of these politicians will say: "I accept and believe, but I can't propose or vote for a law that says others must follow the Church's teachings." Our task as teachers of the faith is to remind people that when you are dealing with human life, you are not allowed to take innocent life.

The law is directed to protect an innocent life; again our task as priests is to help everyone understand that, so that public officials will live it in their private life and in their public life.

As archbishop of Washington, what issues do you and Archbishop Sambini, the papal nuncio to the United States, discuss, and how often do you meet?

DONALD WUERL: Archbishop Sambini is the ambassador to the government of the United States, so his relationship is with the government. Simultaneously, he is the Pope's representative in the US and therefore he meets with Church



leadership, but only about Church issues, never political issues. So our occasional meetings concern religious issues.

So Sambi's daily agenda is no different from that of other ambassadors to the United States?

DONALD WUERL: Correct.

Officially His Holiness is coming to the United States at the invitation of the secretary-general of the United Nations to deliver a message of peace there; will he be delivering a similar message to President Bush? Are there any hints about what the two leaders will discuss?

DONALD WUERL: The Church, as I am, is for world peace. Benedict XVI has always preached for peace, be it in the Middle East, Darfur, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, or Tibet, but we are pastors, teachers, and sanctifiers, not politicians. It's the task of the Church to preach the Scriptures, to help form moral values. In a democracy it's up to the people to elect their politicians as they see fit, according to their conscience.

The Holy Father will be meeting privately with President Bush and has not divulged the topics of their conversation to-be. We won't ever know what they actually say to each other unless they issue some kind of communiqué at the end.

Is the message of this papal visit: Peace between nations, peace between the world's different religions, and forgiveness on the part of the Holy Father for his wayward child, the American Church, for its cover-up of its pedophile clergy?

DONALD WUERL: I believe his message will be what he and other Popes have been saying for years and years: that

we must work for a more peaceful world, a world of social justice where there's respect for the individual, for the family, a world that is truly reflective of God's law. These are all possible topics.

In addition there will be so many interfaith meetings I think the Holy Father wants to highlight the need to bring religious leaders together so they can focus on the common denominators in their different faiths and traditions. These common denominators can be the foundations for a good and just society worldwide. What better country to test this than the United States, which was founded on the Mayflower Compact and religious freedom!

Except for his meeting with President Bush and his speech at the United Nations, the other events on the Holy Father's agenda are pastoral. So what do you think are the Holy Father's aspirations and goals from this visit? Those of the American Church? Yours personally? Those of the average American Catholic?

DONALD WUERL: I wouldn't be able to know what the Holy Father's personal hopes and goals are, but I would think from the perspective of those of us who are waiting to see him that he will come to encourage us in our faith, that he will come to affirm us, and I think he's going to challenge us to try to live out the Gospel as fully as we can. I think there's going to be a two-prong message. One is to say to us that he recognizes that we're working very hard on our faith and he'll confirm that. Then he's going to say to us what we also already know: that we could be doing better.

As for the American clergy, I can only speak for myself, but I would anticipate their hope for this type of message.

It's something that I hear His Holiness says regularly when he speaks in St. Peter's Square at his Wednesday audiences: a challenge to us all to live out our faith, to put the past behind us and go forward.

As for the American general public, I think there's probably anticipation that, when they actually hear him, they'll hear an echo of what he's been saying and what the Church has been teaching for decades. In other words, what they'll hear is going to resonate with what we've heard the Church saying all our lives. His challenge to live a life of faith, to live by the Gospels, will leave a lasting impression on all of us. It will be the legacy of his visit.

Anything that you would like to add, that no other journalist has asked you so far?

DONALD WUERL: I do like to keep repeating that the reason we, the American Catholic clergy and its flock, are filled with so much joy and enthusiasm is that Benedict XVI will be coming to the United States as Peter. We will see him with the eyes of faith and what we will feel is our connectedness to the Apostles, the Gospels, and to Christ. That's what makes it so unique. There's no other person on this planet with the same relationship to all of us as the Pope, because he's Peter.

Lucy Gordan

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