



Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory delivers his homily at the Building Trades' Workers Memorial Day Mass at St. Camillus Church in Silver Spring, Md., April 26, 2022. Behind him are banners representing local unions. (CNS photo/Andrew Biraj, Catholic Standard)

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Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory wore a white hard hat instead of a bishop's miter as he processed to the altar April 26 for the second annual Building Trades' Workers Memorial Day Mass at St. Camillus Church in Silver Spring.

The pastor who organized the Mass, Franciscan Fr. Brian Jordan, also wore a hard hat during the entrance procession.

The cardinal solemnly walked past and incensed 20 similar hard hats placed in chairs in a semicircle in front of the sanctuary, with a red rose placed beside each one.

Nineteen of the hats had the name of a construction worker who died on the job site in the past year in Washington, Maryland and Virginia. The 20th seat represented the 261 construction workers who died of COVID-19 this past year.

"Our prayer is for their peace with Christ and in gratitude for the works of their hands," the cardinal said in his homily.

Behind him along the church walls were six banners representing the Baltimore-D.C. Building Trades Council and local unions for steamfitters, plumbers and gasfitters, sheet metal workers, electrical workers, painters and allied trades.

The Memorial Mass for construction workers was held as part of International Workers Memorial Day observed annually on April 28. It drew hundreds of men and women who are part of local building trade unions.

"Today we gather to remember all those construction workers who have died during the course of their labors. We remember the families of those workers who continue to grieve their passing. We also remember those who have been seriously injured or whose deaths may be attributed to the pandemic," Gregory said.

He said this was also a time to be thankful for their work and for the care they gave their families and loved ones.

The cardinal noted that Jesus spoke to a variety of working people, including fishermen, teachers, lawyers, judges, tax collectors, tent makers and carpenters.

"Above all, Jesus seemed to have made people believe that they were much more than their jobs, more than their work, more than their skills. He spoke to their hearts. He drew the best out of people. He made them dream. He still does," Gregory said.

He also stressed that Jesus recognized these workers as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, neighbors and benefactors for their communities.

During the Mass, Jordan asked the congregation to stand for "a sacred moment, now in remembrance, the reading of the names of our 19 brothers who have died since April 28, 2021." He said 13 of the 19 men who died were Latinos, and all 19 who died at job sites were nonunion workers.

"That has been a constant statistic for many, many years here in the United States, the use and abuse of our Latino brothers and sisters," the priest said.

Juan Sotelo, an electrician with IBEW Local 26 who attends Mass at St. Matthias the Apostle Church in Lanham, Maryland, read the names of the 19 construction workers who died on the job, and a large bell outside the church tolled as each man's name was read. Then for the 20th chair in front of the altar he said: "all the brothers and sisters in the construction industry who have died from COVID-19."

After Communion, the human face of that loss could be seen, when Jordan invited a woman to join him. "This is the wife of one of our parishioners who died in February of this year," he said, remembering Hermenegildo Avizurez Chajon, a St. Camillus parishioner who died at a work site in Baltimore on Feb. 21. The worker's wife Lodia stood with the priest, who spoke to her in Spanish, offering the community's prayerful support.

"All they want to do is go to work and all they want to do is come back to their families," the priest said.

Jordan then welcomed Leah Ford, the chief of staff for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in the U.S. Department of Labor. Ford said she brought greetings from U.S. Secretary of Labor Martin Walsh, who was a construction worker

and member of Laborers Local 223 in Boston and led the Building and Construction Trades Council there and served as the mayor of Boston.

Ford said that every week, OSHA sends out condolence letters to families of people who lost their lives at work. She said concern for workers and fallen workers "fuels our mission ... of keeping workers safe at work."

In closing remarks, Jordan said that when people ask him why unions are needed, he points out that without unions, workers wouldn't have things like 40-hour workweeks, collective bargaining, pensions and health care benefits.

He thanked Gregory for celebrating the Mass, and the congregation applauded.

Addressing the workers in the congregation, Jordan said: "The church has not forgotten you and please don't forget us."

[Zimmermann is editor of the Catholic Standard, archdiocesan newspaper of Washington.]

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