

Wuerl to meet with Pope Francis to discuss resignation

The Archbishop of Washington told priests Tuesday that he intends to meet with Pope Francis soon to discuss his resignation from office.

In a letter sent to priests of the Archdiocese of Washington Sept. 11, Cardinal Donald Wuerl wrote that a decision about his future role in the archdiocese is “an essential aspect so that this archdiocesan Church we all love can move forward.

“I intend, in the very near future, to go to Rome to meet with our Holy Father about the resignation I presented nearly three years ago, November 12, 2015.”

Wuerl presented his resignation to the pope in 2015 upon turning 75, the age at which diocesan bishops are requested to submit letters of resignation to the pope.

Calls for Pope Francis to accept Wuerl’s resignation have been frequent in recent months. In June, Wuerl’s predecessor in Washington, Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, was publicly accused of serially sexually abusing a teenage boy in the 1970s. As further accusations were made that McCarrick sexually coerced and assaulted seminarians for decades, questions were raised about whether Wuerl knew about McCarrick’s apparent sexual misconduct.

After the Aug. 14 release of a report from a grand jury in Pennsylvania, calls for Wuerl to be replaced intensified. That report suggested that Wuerl had been negligent in the supervision of priests accused of sexually abusing minors while he was Bishop of Pittsburgh, in one case permitting a priest accused of sexual abuse to transfer from ministry in one diocese to another, and signing off on the priest’s suitability for ministry.

An Aug. 25 letter from a former Vatican ambassador to the U.S., Archbishop Carlo Viganò, raised further questions about Wuerl’s knowledge of McCarrick’s misconduct, and a report that Wuerl permitted McCarrick to have seminarian assistants while under investigation for sexual abuse led to additional criticism.

Wuerl’s Sept. 11 letter noted that he had gathered with priests on Sept. 3, praying with them while trying to “discern the best course of action for me to pursue as we face new revelations of the extent of the horror of clergy abuse of children and the failures in episcopal oversight.”

“At issue is how to begin effectively to bring a new level of healing to survivors who have personally suffered so much and to the faithful entrusted to our care who have also been wounded by the shame of these terrible actions and have questions about their bishop’s ability to provide the necessary leadership,” Wuerl added.

A spokesman for the Archdiocese of Washington, Ed McFadden, told CNA that Wuerl’s letter is “evidence of a serious and constructive discernment process that Cardinal Wuerl went through, and his appreciation to the priests for their support and engagement in the discernment process, to help him work through it.”

“He understands the need for healing, and that he certainly wants to be a part of that and not bring damage or harm to the Church that he clearly loves,” McFadden said.

Wuerl plans to celebrate a Sept. 14 Mass for Healing in Washington. McFadden told CNA that Wuerl sent his letter before that Mass because the cardinal did not want his status to become a distraction to that event.

Wuerl, McFadden said, “wants the focus to be on the survivors and the start of the healing process” during that Mass.

The Archdiocese of Washington would not confirm when Wuerl will meet with Pope Francis.