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CARDINAL GEORGE WILLIAM MUNDELEIN CHICAGO'S FIRST CARDINAL A TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW

By Ron Grossman, Chicago Tribune Reporter, July 20, 2015



Seeing the red hat of Chicago's first Roman Catholic cardinal hanging from the ceiling of Holy Name Cathedral, the city's next archbishop might well say to himself: "That is a tough act to follow."

George Mundelein put the heartland on the ecclesiastical map, ending an East Coast monopoly on America's Catholic cardinals. Crossing carrots and sticks, he brought mutually suspicious ethnic churches together into a truly unified archdiocese. Never one to duck a battle, Mundelein threw down the gauntlet to Adolf Hitler and Mae West. He was unabashedly liberal at a time when the Catholic Church was uneasy with a changing modern world. His pronouncements on social issues gave the impression there was a copy of "The Communist Manifesto" on his bedside table.

Yet it almost never happened. Mundelein's pastorate here nearly came to a tragic end when it had scarcely begun. He was named archbishop in 1915, during a turbulent era when some radical activists thought that to establish a better society, they had to pull down the pillars of the existing one. On February 10, 1916, one such rebel, a chef at the University Club, tried to poison the guests at a municipal banquet honoring Mundelein's arrival by lacing their soup with arsenic. The plot was foiled by another cook who thought the broth seemed spoiled, and by the presence of a quick-thinking doctor.

Jean Cronos, who hatched the plot, fled, leaving it to others to explain his motivation at a meeting of local anarchists, as the Tribune reported. "The church system tramples on the poor, and it preyed on the mind of Cronos until he became desperate," a comrade of Cronos said.

Mundelein was unharmed, having not touched his soup. But it was the kind of experience that would have changed another man's politics, according to a standard formula: A conservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality. But years later, according to the Tribune, Mundelein told a gathering of Canadian Catholics: "After all, the strength and all the virility of the church has always rested in the laboring class. Whenever and if ever the church depended on the nobility, on the leisure class, for support and representation, she soon found she had built on sand."



Archbishop James Quigley

Mundelein was born in 1872 on New York's Lower East Side, one of nine children in a family mired in poverty. He took refuge from the limitations of tenement life by throwing himself into his schoolwork – so much so that, graduating from seminary at 20, he had to wait four years before reaching the minimum age for being a priest. At 37 he became the nation's youngest bishop, and at 43 he was named archbishop of Chicago, where he would serve for 24 years.

At his installation in 1916, he told his clergy to prepare themselves for change. "I am different from the late archbishop – the Lord cast me in a different mold," Mundelein said, alluding to his predecessor, James Quigley. "Perhaps I am quicker in grasping a thing; and I am more likely to act more quickly."

However other prelates took these words, 145 Polish priests weren't pleased. One of Chicago's largest communities, Polish Catholics had hoped for a Polish-speaking bishop – or, failing that, to maintain the autonomy they had under previous archbishops. But Mundelein was wary of the church's counterpart to Chicago's ethnic patchwork – specifically its clannish Polish, Bohemian, German and Irish parishes.

Perpetuating the system played into the hands of anti-Catholic bigots, he reminded critics: “For generations the Catholics of the United States have repelled the unjust accusations of disloyalty to the American government and subservience to foreign potentates.”



All black and white photos are from the Mundelein Website

Cardinal Mundelein Returns to Chicago after Receiving the Cardinal's Hat in Rome

Unity came at a cost of hurt feelings but enabled Mundelein to play on a larger stage than that of his predecessors. An estimated one million Chicagoans lined the streets in 1924 when he returned from Rome with his cardinal's hat. Two years later, he hosted a Eucharistic Congress, a Catholic riff on an old-time revival meeting, that drew a million pilgrims. Those who could not find hotel rooms were housed in tent cities in the forest preserves. Train after train carried them to the closing ceremony at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake, the \$20 million facility the

cardinal founded in the northern suburb of Area, which renamed itself after Mundelein in his honor.

By then his influence extended beyond the church. His circle of friends included former Illinois Governor Edward Dunne. Mundelein was paid deference by Chicago Mayor William "Big Bill" Thompson, who went from vocally anti-Catholic to recognizing the power of the Catholic vote. Years later, when state officials wondered who should get Illinois license plate No 1, the consensus agreement was Mundelein.

Cardinal Mundelein meets with President Roosevelt



But the cardinal's warmest political friendship was with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom he touted with the zeal of a Chicago precinct captain. During the Great Depression, Mundelein spoke to an assembly of Catholic women about FDR, whose "first concern was for the poor, the helpless, the forgotten man," he said.

Tough times produce angry voices – among them Father Charles Coughlin, a Detroit radio broadcaster who preached that Jews were the source of the world's ills. Mundelein rebuked Coughlin in a message read over the NBC network in 1939. The Tribune noted that "the seriousness of the rebuke was emphasized by the fact that the cardinal went outside his church area to administer the reprimand."

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Mundelein also took a swipe at buxom Hollywood star West, representative of an oversexed pop culture. But in 1937 he trained his biggest rhetorical guns on Hitler, decrying his anti-Catholic propaganda and treatment of German Catholics. Mundelein called Hitler "an Austrian paperhanger, and a poor one at that, I'm told." That provoked a diplomatic crisis, with German officials demanding the Vatican rebuke Mundelein. But the papacy remained firmly in Mundelein's corner.



Cardinal Mundelein Speaks out against Adolf Hitler

When he died October 2, 1939, thousands paid their respects to Cardinal Mundelein at Holy Name Cathedral, a boy from New York who had fallen in love with Chicago.



In Death, Thousands pay their Love and Respect to Cardinal Mundelein in Chicago's Cathedral

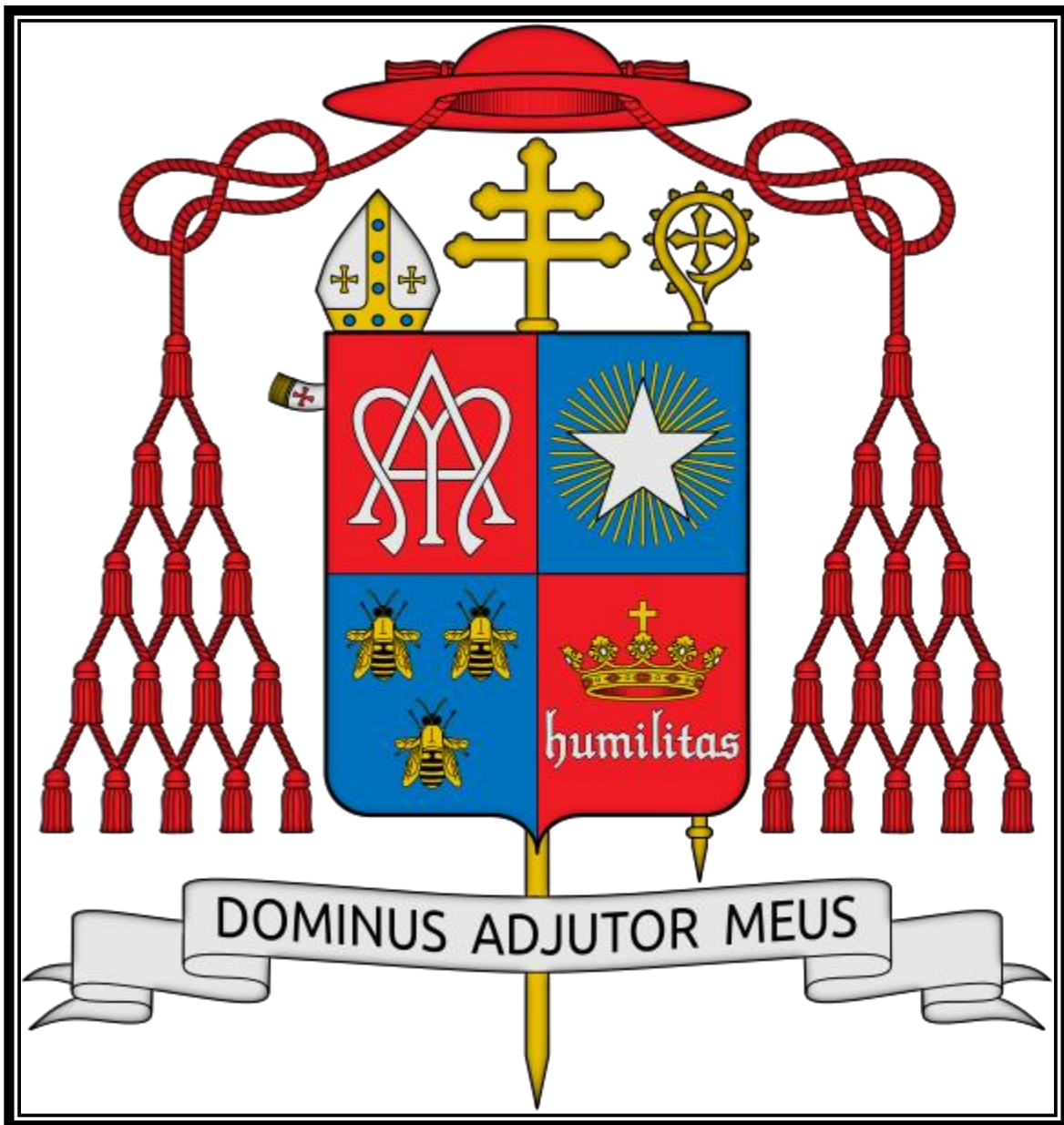


Toward the end of his life, Mundelein was asked by a Tribune reporter if he ever considered returning to New York. "You and I live in the greatest city in the world," the cardinal replied. "The only way they will ever get me to leave Chicago is feet first."



Mundelein Seminary

Photos by John E Boll 2013



**Cardinal George William Mundelein's
Coat of Arms**