

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

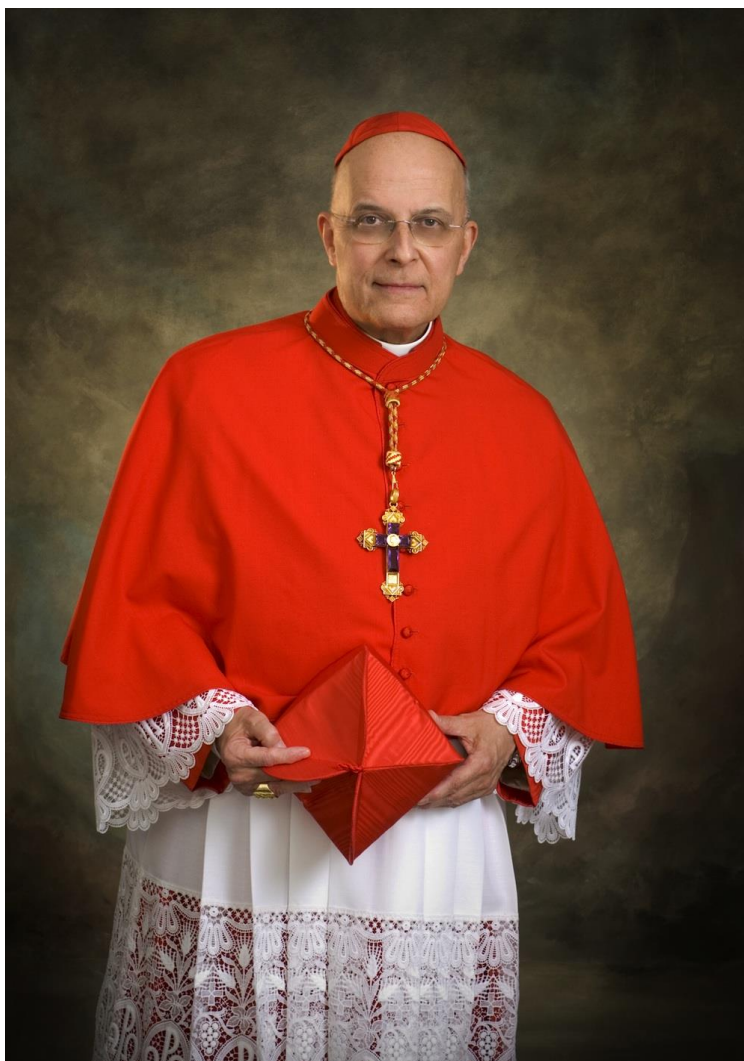
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## CHICAGO'S CARDINAL FRANCIS EUGENE GEORGE The boy from St Pascal, who did not let polio derail his dreams, rose to prominence in American Church Part I

By Manya Brachear Pashman, printed in the *Chicago Tribune* on Sunday, April 19, 2015



**Cardinal Francis Eugene George, OMI  
1937 – 2015**

***For all the things that polio took away from a young Francis George*** – running, playing baseball and riding his bicycle – it did little to derail his dreams of becoming a priest.

Even after he entered his freshman year of Chicago high school seminary on crutches, only to be sent away with predictions of failure, he pressed on with still greater determination.

George went on to conquer the disease and far exceed his youthful aspirations. From his childhood on the Northwest Side, George embarked on a spiritual career that took him around the globe as a missionary and then brought him back home to Chicago, where he was appointed the spiritual leader of the archdiocese's more than 2 million Catholics.

Cardinal Francis Eugene George, who led Chicago's church for 17 years and last year became the city's first archbishop to retire, died Friday after years of treatment for cancer. He took his last breath in the company of friends and family, in the residence he'd long occupied as leader of the archdiocese. "He looked very peaceful," said long-time friend Colleen Dolan. "There was no pain on his face."

A public visitation will begin at 2:30 pm Tuesday at Holy Name Cathedral. George's funeral will be at noon Thursday, with a ticket required to attend. Burial will follow in the George family plot at All Saints Cemetery in Des Plaines.

As archbishop of Chicago, George navigated Catholic school closings, sought social justice on matters such as race and immigration, and burnished a reputation for candid conservatism within the church. But the issue that left arguably the biggest mark on his tenure was his handling of the clergy sexual abuse scandal, which elevated his national profile even as it invited criticism closer to home.

George, who was often described by his brother bishops as brilliant, became the intellectual leader of the American church and emerged as the point man between the U.S. and the Vatican on such matters as the sexual abuse crisis and liturgy of the Mass, playing a key role in revisions that brought the English translation closer to the original Latin.



"He stood apart for his intelligence, his ability to make the church's proposal in a compelling way to contemporary society, his deep faith, personal holiness and courage," said Catholic scholar and papal biographer George Weigel. "He was a man of manifest faith and marked ability who struck a chord of personal integrity with just about everyone. Those qualities don't always make for a smooth passage through the rocks and shoals of ecclesiastical life, but I can think of very few people who didn't respect Francis George."

To priests and parishioners in Chicago, their archbishop sometimes seemed more professional than pastoral. Still, he won over most people with his honesty, wry sense of humor and deep love of the church. In private, his friends said, George was a gracious and sensitive man who

revealed a warmer side at small dinner parties, where he spoke of his love of science fiction and sometimes erupted in loud guffaws.

His public persona and responsibilities, however, tended to overshadow his softer side. George shepherded the nation's third largest archdiocese through more than 70 school closings and embarked on a campaign to raise hundreds of millions of dollars to save those that remained.

In 2002, at the height of the sexual abuse scandal, George emerged as a leading figure in negotiations with the Vatican over a zero-tolerance policy. His prominence came about partly because of his previous years in Rome, his theological prowess and his leadership of one of the nation's largest dioceses.

"He spoke very courageously to the congregations and leaders in Rome, helping them to see the pain of victims," recalled Bishop Gerald Kicanas, of Tucson, Arizona, who previously served as auxiliary bishop in Chicago. "They didn't always have the occasion of meeting victims face to face," and George had.

Shuttling back and forth from bishops meetings in Dallas to Vatican meetings in Rome, George led the way in expressing the position of the bishops to the Vatican: that any priest guilty of a single offense of sexual abuse of a minor should be removed from ministry. In addressing bishops at their Washington meeting in November 2002, George asked them to accept a plan that would treat both accused priests and victims with compassion.

"We are sometimes asked to choose between the accuser and the accused," George said. "We cannot choose one or the other; we have to choose both. We have to love both."



But in 2006, George faced a scandal in his own archdiocese when then-priest Daniel McCormack was charged with sexually abusing five boys. He pleaded guilty the following year, and further investigation revealed that church officials, including George, had received past abuse allegations involving the priest and failed to remove him from the church or keep him away from children.

Confronted with the evidence, and under fire from parishioners and abuse victims, George placed the blame on himself. "I'm saddened by my own failure – very much so," George told reporters.

The archdiocese hired an independent auditor to troubleshoot the church's failures in the McCormack case and posted the names of priests removed from ministry for substantiated allegations of abusing minors going back decades. The cardinal later released his own deposition taken by victims' attorneys.

In January 2014, as part of settlement agreements, the archdiocese released documents from the investigation of 30 of those priests. George released the files of 36 others last November, just weeks before his successor arrived.

"Painful though publicly reviewing the past can be, it is part of the accountability and transparency to which the Archdiocese is committed," George wrote to parishioners before the document's release.

During his early years in Chicago, through his elevation as cardinal in 1998, he sometimes seemed perplexed by the prominence of his pulpit and the reverberations of his public remarks. His relationship with the news media was often prickly, and in one instance he berated reporters for taking notes in church, saying they reminded him of Communist spies who had followed him while he preached many years ago in Poland.

That kind of candor characterized his leadership of Chicago's Catholics and presidency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Alternately erudite and engaging, blunt and exacting, his off-the-cuff comments usually became the most memorable moments of a news conference or interview.

In the church George was known as a staunch and learned defender of Catholic teachings on abortion, the death penalty and gay marriage. As an administrator he took note of matters large and small, addressing them with a laser-like focus and disarming frankness that charmed some, alienated others and sometimes did a little of both at once.

After the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005, George joined six other American cardinals in Rome for the pontiff's funeral and the conclave that would select Pope Benedict XVI. For George the loss hit hard because of the special kinship he shared with John Paul, one built on mutual respect, a shared passion for philosophy and devotion to spreading the Gospel. Likewise, he shared an intellectual connection with Benedict XVI.

George passionately defended the election of Benedict in the face of critics who said his election would divide Catholics. Just as John Paul II was elected in 1978 to confront the threat to the church from the Soviet East, George said, Benedict was chosen to confront the threat from the West, in the form of secularism and relativism.

“Cardinal George appreciated the depth of Benedict’s teaching,” said the Rev. Thomas Rosica, the English-language assistant to the Holy See Press Office who had known Cardinal George since the 1980s. “He also understood the limitations of the governance of Pope Benedict. Cardinal George became the authoritative voice, interpretive voice of Pope Benedict to the North American church.”



Eight years later, Benedict’s historic resignation stunned George as it did the rest of the world’s Catholics. In the days that followed, George said it underscored the idea that the papal office belongs to the church, not to the man who holds the title.

The choice of Pope Francis, then known as Buenos Aires Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio, wasn’t as big a surprise to George as was the Argentine’s newly adopted populist leadership style. “I said what we needed was a pope who knows how to govern and who has a heart for the poor ... and that’s exactly what we have,” George said in a Tribune interview nine months after Francis was elected. “What’s a little unexpected is the popular approach, because that wasn’t part of his governmental style in Buenos Aires.”



“He sends out so many signals it gets a bit jumbled at times,” George said months later. “I’m sure he’s not confused, himself. It’s confusing for a lot of people including myself at times. George never got a chance to ask the pope about that face to face.

On November 18, 2014, George passed the crozier to Chicago’s ninth archbishop, Blasé Cupich.





**Interior of Holy Name Cathedral, Chicago**

Photos by John E Boll 2013



**Residence of the Archbishop of Chicago**

To be continued in Part II