

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

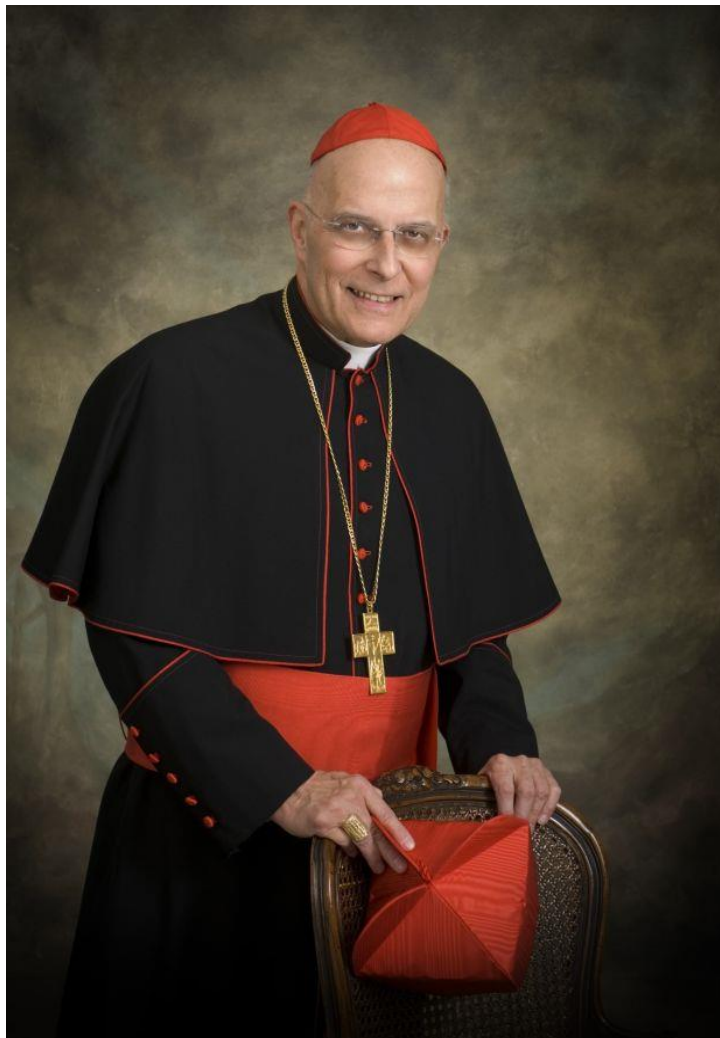
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## CHICAGO'S CARDINAL FRANCIS EUGENE GEORGE The boy from St Pascal, who did not let polio derail his dreams, rose to prominence in the American Church Part II

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



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

Francis Eugene George was born January 16, 1932, in Chicago's Saint Elizabeth Hospital to Francis and Julia George. His older sister, Margaret Mary Cain, was almost 6. Two years after his birth, the family moved from the South Side to a red-brick bungalow in Portage Park, just two blocks from Saint Pascal Church, a working-class white ethnic parish.

George's father was an operating engineer for Chicago Public Schools. His mother worked at an advertising agency until she had her children. Both parents were active in the church, with the elder George serving as an usher and his wife as a member of the Altar and Rosary Society.

Young Frannie went to Saint Pascal School, where he knew early on that he wanted to serve the church. "The first time I thought about being a priest was my first Holy Communion when I really came to appreciate the nature of that sacrament as much as a 7 year-old could," he said in a church documentary in December 2013 commemorating his 50th anniversary as a priest.



Photo from the Chicago Tribune

### **Francis George as an Altar Boy Considered Priesthood at age 7**

Indeed, he was undeterred from his goal. His family enrolled him in the now-closed Saint Henry Preparatory Seminary, a boarding school just outside of Saint Louis, in Belleview, ILL. It was run by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate religious order, whose mission is to evangelize the poor and to which he would devote his life.

After Saint Henry's, George officially entered the order in 1957. He took his first vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in 1961 and was ordained a priest on December 21, 1963, at Saint Pascal Church.

George was 13, not even out of grammar school, when polio struck. Though it kept him out of school for four months, he still graduated first in his class. The illness, however, nearly ended his hopes of becoming a priest.

When he arrived at Quigley Preparatory Seminary in Chicago on crutches, eager to begin his freshman year, George was told he could not stay and likely never would be ordained. "The polio may have struck for a reason," Cain, the sister six years his senior, told the Tribune in 1997 when Francis George was appointed Chicago's eighth Roman Catholic archbishop. "That's when the polio struck, when he was praying to God (about where to study). It came like an answer.



*Photo from the Chicago Tribune*

**Francis J George, left, and Julia George, parents of Father Francis E George**

As a member of the Oblates, George was placed on the academic track, where he thrived as a theologian and teacher and was known as a Renaissance man for his love of film, theater and opera.

In all he would accumulate four notable degrees: a master's in philosophy from the Catholic University of America in Washington; a master's in theology from the University of Ottawa in Canada; a PhD in American philosophy from Tulane University in New Orleans; and a sacred theology doctorate in ecclesiology from Pontifical Urban University in Rome.

As he advanced in scholarship, George rose rapidly within the Oblates. In 1973 he moved to Saint Paul, Minn., to serve as head of the order's Midwestern province, which covered nine states. After just 18 months, at age 37, he was named the worldwide order's vicar general, its second in command, and moved to Rome.

As vicar general from 1974 to 1986, George traveled widely, visiting many of the 68 countries where the order's 5,000 members perform their missionary work. George said what moved and inspired him most were missionaries who served the outcasts of society.

George moved back to the U.S. in 1987 to become the coordinator of the Circle of Fellows at the Cambridge Center for the Study of Faith and Culture in Massachusetts. The Catholic think tank was established by Cardinal Bernard Law, then archbishop of Boston, to study the relationship between the Catholic faith and American culture. Law would later become one of the principal promoters of George's candidacy for archbishop of Chicago.



Photo from Yakima Diocesan Website

### **Saint Paul Cathedral, Yakima, Washington**

In Cambridge, George cemented relationships with prominent officials and thinkers in the American church, which led to his appointment as bishop of rural Yakima, Washington, a diocese of 64,000 whose population was more than half Latino and included many migrant workers.

When he was installed there in September 1990, he used his disability as a touching metaphor for difficulties he would encounter as their leader and his limitations as a human being. "I will fall from time to time," George told them. "And I just ask you to pick me up and let us continue on."

During the six years he served in Yakima, he made bringing together the diocese's white and Latino populations a personal mission. He persuaded the two communities to worship together in the same churches and opened up diocesan jobs to Latinos. That experience would help him in later years, when he became more outspoken on racism and immigration.

In 1996, George was appointed archbishop of Portland, a diocese that covers all of western Oregon and included 304,000 Catholics. He was there only 10 months when the pope taped him to replace the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin as Chicago's archbishop.

#### **A RETURN HOME**

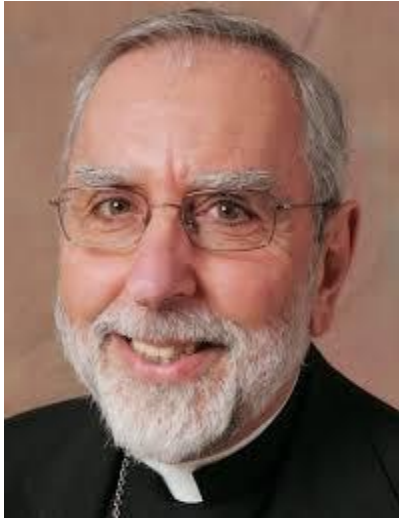
At his installation in May 1997, George introduced himself humbly to his new flock with a plea for friendship and intimacy. Fully aware that many still mourned the loss of Bernardin, who introduced himself as "Joseph, your brother," George started by saying, "I am Francis, your neighbor."

But the transition from the liberal-minded and much-loved Bernardin to George the disciplinarian proved somewhat difficult. In his first year, some priests frustrated with his strict



adherence to church teaching and liturgy began referring to him as “Francis the Corrector.” He also stunned many observers during a homily in Old Saint Patrick’s Church in January 1998 when he pronounced liberal Catholicism “an exhausted project.”

“Whenever there’s a change in leadership, there’s always a time of adjustment that has to take place because people are used to working with a particular person,” said Kicannas, the former auxiliary bishop of Chicago. “He is very direct, a very different personality than Cardinal Bernardin. And I think that took getting used to.”



**Bishop Gerald Kicannas**

In Chicago, George also confronted a Catholic school system struggling to survive. Though he fought off school closings in his early years, George was later forced to shutter 70 schools – mostly on the city’s South and West sides. In 2007 he closed Quigley, the school that had turned him away as a teen. In June 2013 the cardinal unveiled a \$350 million capital campaign to fund scholarships for needy students, develop education programming, improve school buildings and finance capital needs at local parishes.

In fact, his role was as much CEO as pastor. To overcome the damage done by the Great Recession and the abuse scandal, he looked to Wall Street. The archdiocese sold \$160 million in bonds in 2012 to ensure the church’s long-term financial viability and improve its cash flow. The archdiocese also implemented more transparent accounting practices near the end of George’s tenure and, according to the archdiocese’s chief financial officer and internal financial records, its long-overdrawn budget will be balanced by next year.

Meanwhile, George chose evangelism as the topic of his first pastoral letter in 1997. In his second pastoral letter in April 2001 he tackled the scourge of racism, a topic that had touched him personally. “Both my father and my mother had African-American acquaintances from work and other circumstances. They spoke well of them, but we never visited each other’s homes nor went to one another’s family celebrations or wakes,” George wrote. “Nor was it any more thinkable in Chicago than in Tennessee that we would live in the same neighborhood. The teaching in my home and in my parish was good; that experience just didn’t match the teaching. That gap is called ‘sin.’”

He was equally sensitive and compassionate when speaking about immigration reform, an issue he advocated during a massive rally in Grant Park in 2006. “Respect means that every person has human dignity and must be treated as a child of God,” George told the thousands who gathered there.

“Respect means that families, in which each of us first learned what it means to be a human being, should not be divided, that husbands should not be separated from wives nor mothers from their children. Respect means that people who have been part of this country’s social and economic fabric for years should not now be treated as if they do not count, as if their contribution can be simply dismissed and they sent away.”

George was no less passionate in his defense of positions that were more politically conservative, and as his profile in the Catholic Church rose, the cardinal became more outspoken in articulating the church's stand on them.

Before the presidential election of 2004, amid debate over whether Catholic politicians who support abortion should receive Communion, George insisted that the decision should be left to the politician's pastor. "A firm case can be made that refusing Communion, after pastoral counseling and discussion, is a necessary response to the present scandal," he wrote. "Some bishops have made that case. If I haven't made it in this archdiocese, it's primarily because I believe it would turn the reception of Holy Communion into a circus here."

The Eucharist is "our highest, most perfect form of worship of God. It should be manipulated by no one, for any purpose," he wrote.



Later, as president of the National Bishops' Conference, he confronted the Obama administration on abortion rights and same-sex marriage. "He did it out of obedience" said Rosica of the Holy See Press Office. "It was his time, and it was his moment. A missionary is someone who is sent."

In private settings, friends said, George showed a softer and gentler side than his public persona often suggested. Martin E. Marty, professor emeritus of the University of Chicago Divinity School and a close friend, recalled a dinner party at Marty's home at which guests were asked to name a work of fiction that would better explain their personality. The selected work could be a novel, play or film. George surprised the guests by picking "2001" A Space Odyssey." "It seemed to be a fantasy way of escaping the ministered life," Marty said.

### **A grave Diagnosis**

In July 2006, George was diagnosed with bladder cancer. Once again confronted with a life-changing health challenge, the cardinal turned to his faith and said he felt no fear of dying. "You meet the Lord in prayer every day. The idea of meeting him is, while disquieting, not something I think I am afraid of," George said before undergoing surgery at Loyola University Medical Center.



Cancer returned in August 2012 and again in March 2014. Both times he maintained a rigorous public schedule, only occasionally bowing out to deal with complications from chemotherapy. "I don't know that I should talk about doing things despite having had polio as a boy and now being diagnosed with cancer as an adult," he said in the church documentary. "You do things with those illnesses. Even illness can be a gift in some way. Polio focuses you, for one thing. There are things you can do and things you cannot

do. You have to learn not to resent the fact that you can't be an Olympic runner. That's important to learn. So I had to learn it very early."

In the end, in the face of the church's financial hardships or sexual abuse scandal, or his own failing health, it was George's undying faith and devotion to the church that left the deepest impression on those who knew him. "I think he would want to be remembered as a good and faithful priest," Weigel said. "That's all he ever wanted to be."



**Cardinal George greets Pope John Paul, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis**





Archbishop Cupich and Cardinal George



Cardinal George lies In-State in the Cathedral

## The Funeral Mass of Cardinal George In Chicago's Cathedral

These photos were taken from the internet







*Chicago's New Archbishop Blasé J Cupich*



*Farewell to Cardinal Francis George*