

Reflections on the Life and Legacy of Cardinal Francis George

By Rev. Michael J. Furlan

For over the past 17 years, Cardinal Francis George has been my “boss.” There have been four other Archbishops during my lifetime. Cardinal Stritch died when I was in grade school. Cardinal Meyer died when I was in high school. After that, the office of the Archbishop of Chicago became a more significant part of my life. It was Cardinal Cody who ordained me and became my first “boss” in the priesthood. He assigned me as Associate Pastor to St. Celestine and St. Leo the Great parishes. He was archbishop here for almost 17 years and died a few months before his 75th birthday. Cardinal Bernardin appointed me to my first pastorate at St. Leo during his 14 years as our archbishop. He died at 68. Cardinal George renewed my appointment as pastor of St. Leo and subsequently assigned me to St. Germaine, first as the associate and then as the pastor. Of all the archbishops I have “worked for,” I feel I’ve known Cardinal George the best. He’s the one I have served with the longest. He’s the one I’ve been closest to in age and the one I have spent the most time with, in meetings, at formal and informal gatherings, and even in one-on-one conversations. Although I served during Cardinal Bernadin’s tenure for nearly as many years, the opportunity to engage in contact with him was limited, both by circumstances and, I believe, by his own natural reticence and reserve.

Additionally, he is the sixth Cardinal our city has had, the eighth archbishop of Chicago and our thirteenth ordinary (head of the diocese). But he is first archbishop or bishop to retire from that position. When he was first appointed, that was something he said he hoped he would be able to do. He is also the oldest ordinary in the history of the Chicago. Only Cardinal Cody, who died at the age of 74, comes close. Although Cardinal Cody was the Archbishop of Chicago almost as long as Cardinal George, I only “worked for him” for 7 of his nearly 17 years here. The other archbishops did make it at least into their 60’s. However, the first bishop of Chicago, Rt. Rev. William Quarter died at age 36. One, Rt. Rev. Anthony O’Regan resigned at age 49 and died eight years later. Another, Rt. Rev. James Duggan, was hospitalized for 30 years at age 44. He was replaced by Bishop Thomas Foley who served as administrator and who died at the age of 66, at which time Most Rev. Patrick Feehan was named the first Archbishop of Chicago. Cardinal George is the second member of a religious order to head our archdiocese. The second bishop of Chicago, James Van De Velde was a Jesuit. But Cardinal George is the first and, so far, the only native born Chicagoan to hold that position.

But there is more to Cardinal Francis George than his “statistical” place in the history of the Archdiocese. Usually, the media present him only as a figure of authority. Most people only see him at

official ceremonies. Sometimes, following those functions, people do get to interact with him on a less formal basis. One of the things that is apparent in those settings is that he genuinely enjoys being with people. He would rather sit at a table with the “common people” than be isolated in a “place of honor.” He has a keen mind and can integrate diverse intellectual disciplines, as is often evident in his writings. He is also very quick witted, sometimes “shoots from the hip” with comments. That’s a trait that, even he admits, sometimes gets him into trouble. But he welcomes dialogue, and even reasonable disagreement. He wants to hear what you have to say. I have experienced this in his encounters with other priests and even in my own meetings with him. During the closing of St. Leo, he invited me to his residence to hear “my side” of the story, one on one. Although there was little chance that the decision would be changed, we had an open and honest discussion and I felt that he heard my concerns and shared in my struggle. Time and again he has shown his appreciation for the priests of the Archdiocese and the work we do caring for the people of the Archdiocese. What may not always be apparent in his public appearances, but what I find most refreshing, is his sense of humor. He has a quick and energetic laugh and he does not shy away from gentle and affectionate mockery, even at his own expense. In so many of these characteristics, he exhibits an extremely strong humility, able to withstand the trappings of his office. That is also evident in his reaction to his physical condition. All of this is possible because of his deep spirituality and prayer life. Often the true depth of this spiritual life is hidden under all the paraphernalia of the episcopacy.