News



The casket of former U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., is carried by military personnel after his funeral Mass at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Washington Feb. 14, 2019. (CNS/Marvin Joseph, pool via Reuters)

by Catholic News Service

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At a funeral Mass in Washington for former U.S. Rep. John Dingell, former President Bill Clinton said the Democratic congressman should be remembered as "a world-class doer."

"John Dingell was just about the best doer in the history of American public life," Clinton said in eulogizing the man who represented Michigan's 12th Congressional District for more than 59 years, making him the longest serving member of Congress in U.S. history.

Dingell died Feb. 7 at his home in Dearborn, Michigan, at age 92. He retired in 2014 and last year was diagnosed with prostate cancer, which had metastasized. He chose to forgo treatment, and entered hospice care.

A memorial service for Dingell was held Feb. 12 in Dearborn, then his body was flown to Washington for the funeral Mass. On Feb. 15, he was interred at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia outside Washington.

The funeral in the nation's capital was celebrated at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Washington's Georgetown section, home to Jesuit-run Georgetown University, where Dingell earned a bachelor of science degree in chemistry in 1949 and a law degree in 1952.

Hundreds of people packed Holy Trinity, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-California, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and members of Congress from both parties. Jesuit Fr. Patrick Conroy, the House chaplain, delivered the homily.

In his eulogy, Clinton said that over his decades of service, Dingell had had a role in many landmark laws, including the creation of Medicare and Medicaid, Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, the Wilderness Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, and other significant laws to protect public health and natural areas.

He was a leading supporter of organized labor, social welfare and civil rights and at the beginning of every Congress introduced a national health insurance. His long-standing backing of such a health plan ultimately led him to support the Affordable Care Act signed into law in 2010 by President Barack Obama.

The U.S. bishops have been outspoken in their support on many of the issues for which Dingell, a Catholic, advocated. However, he was a supporter of legal abortion,

which the Catholic Church opposes, teaching that life is sacred from the moment of conception to natural death.

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In 2004, Dingell was among 50 Catholic members of the House who wrote to a U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' task force considering how bishops might respond to Catholic politicians who disagree with church teachings.

The signers of the letter said they objected to being singled out on one issue — abortion — because every day they "take steps every day" in Congress "to advance respect for life and the dignity of every human being" through all manner of legislation. They affirmed "the primacy of conscience" in their voting decisions. The U.S. bishops in faithful citizenship have long said conscience "must be consistent with fundamental moral principles," including the church's opposition to abortion.

Dingell was born July 8, 1926, in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The Dingells were in Colorado in search of a cure for John Dingell Sr.'s tuberculosis. The family moved back to Michigan, and in 1932, John Sr. was elected the first representative of what was then Michigan's newly created 15th District. (It is now the 12th District)

In 1944, at 18, John Dingell Jr. joined the U.S. Army and served for a year, then entered Georgetown University. After he earned his law degree he was a lawyer in private practice, a research assistant to a U.S. District Court judge, a congressional employee, a forest ranger, and assistant prosecuting attorney for Wayne County, Michigan, until 1955, when he ran for Congress, to fill the seat held by his father, who died in office.

When Dingell announced he would retire and not seek another term, his wife, Debbie, ran and won the election to succeed him in November 2014.

Former House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, called Dingell "one of the greats, the gentleman from Michigan, the dean of the House, the chairman."

"Many of the most significant laws of our land forged over the last 60 years bear the unmistakable imprint of John David Dingell Jr.," he said in a statement.

Besides his wife, Dingell is survived by four children from his first marriage — two daughters and two sons, one of whom served 15 years in the Michigan Legislature

— and several grandchildren.