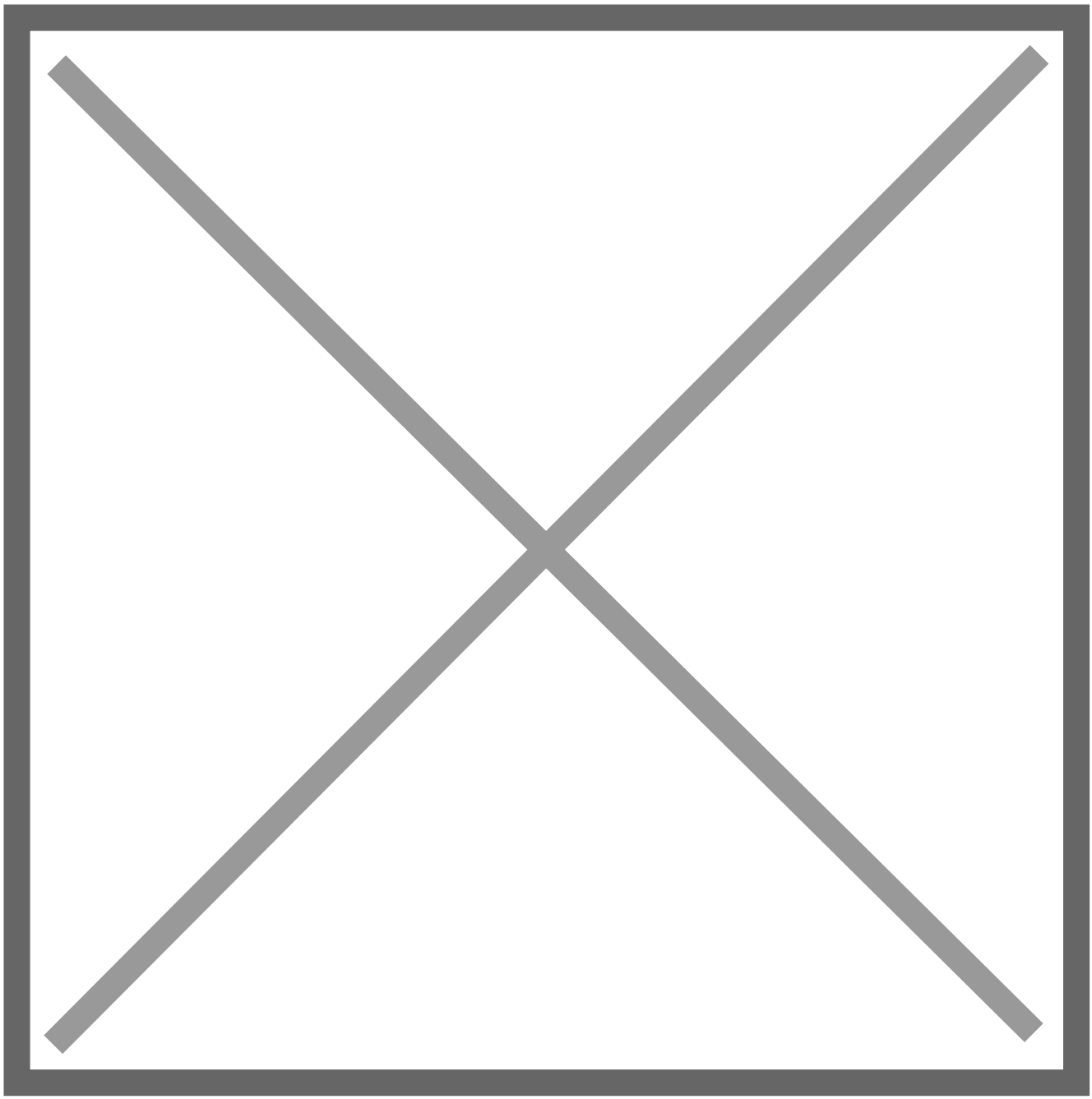
News



Johnny Young, who headed Migration and Refugee Services at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops from 2007-2015, is pictured Feb. 23, 2015. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)



by Catholic News Service

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KENSINGTON, Md. — August 10, 2021
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Johnny Young, who overcame crushing poverty in his youth to serve as a U.S. ambassador in four countries under three presidents and later as director of the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services, died July 24 at age 81.

He died of complications from pancreatic cancer at his home in the Washington suburb of Kensington, his wife, Angelena Young, told The Washington Post.

A memorial Mass was celebrated Aug. 6 at St. Augustine Church in Washington.

Young came to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2007 following retirement after a 38-year career in the Foreign Service. His appointments as a diplomat included time as ambassador to Sierra Leone under President George H.W. Bush, to Togo and Bahrain under President Bill Clinton and to Slovenia under President George W. Bush.

As he retired from MRS at age 75 in 2015, Young told Catholic News Service that he worked to uphold the teachings of the church in serving thousands of refugees and displaced people as well as individuals victimized by human traffickers even when it meant the loss of a multimillion-dollar federal government contract to the agency.

Worth $36 million, the contract to help victims of human trafficking was denied by the Obama administration because the MRS would not offer "the full range of reproduction health services," which included access to abortion under terms of the funding plan.

The denial "stung quite a bit," Young said. "We were the only organization providing assistance to foreign victims of human trafficking. We were the second highest of the evaluations of the bid (by the firm doing the evaluation at the government's

behest). But we refused to provide the services called for by the federal government."

Racial discrimination led Young to a career in the Foreign Service.

"I thought the United States had changed enough for a Black man," he told CNS. However, he found he was turned away when applying for jobs at foreign outposts as a young man in the 1960s.

Young passed the difficult Foreign Service entrance exam and in 1967 he was assigned to a post at the U.S. Embassy in Madagascar becoming one of the few Black professionals in the field. Young's work in overseas assignments became recognized and he was accepted into a State Department leadership-development program.

Soon thereafter he became ambassador to Sierra Leone in 1989. During three years in the post, he helped coordinate assistance for Liberians fleeing that country's civil war.

That service led him to understand the biblical imperative to welcome the stranger.

"There is an underlying biblical ideal to this," he said as he retired from MRS. "We do this because we are Catholic. ... Because of what our Holy Father himself has said in terms of our response to refugees and migrants, we should follow his lead."

From 1994 to 1997, Young was ambassador to Togo and then from 1997 to 2001 ambassador to Bahrain. His final ambassadorship was in Slovenia from 2001 to 2004.

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Born Feb. 6, 1940, Young lived in abject poverty in Savannah, Georgia. In an oral history interview with the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Young recalled living in a house with extended family. His mother died when he was 11 months old and he was raised by an aunt named Lucille.

"My father was with us, but he was a sometimes father. He was here, he was there. He had his friends and his life and what have you, so I didn’t have the kind of fatherly support that I would have liked," Young said.

Lucille was hired as a domestic worker at the Cathedral Basilica of St. John the Baptist and later was asked to be the cook for the church staff. Her work with the church led her to become Catholic. Young said she made sure he and his sister were baptized in the church along with other family members over the years.

The nuns who served at the cathedral and nearby St. Benedict the Moor Church gave Lucille money, urging her to take the family north to Philadelphia where there would be better opportunities, Young said. They made the move in July 1947, when Young was 7.

After high school Young enrolled at Temple University and ended up studying accounting because he had an aptitude for it. He took a job with the city of Philadelphia in 1960 as a junior accountant.

In 1965, the YMCA asked him to be a delegate at an international conference in Beirut. The experience turned him toward a career in the Foreign Service.

After retiring from the State Department, Young served on the boards of several organizations, including the Council on International Educational Exchange, and taught English-language and U.S. citizenship classes. He also wrote a book, "From the Projects to the Palace: A Diplomat's Unlikely Journey from the Bottom to the Top," about his life experiences.

Young is survived by his wife of 54 years, the former Angelena Clark, a son, David Young of Washington, a daughter, Michelle Young of Brooklyn, New York, and a grandson.