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Retired Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston Houston, speaks at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' spring meeting in Los Angeles in this June 15, 2006, file photo. The archbishop, who headed the Texas archdiocese from 1985-2006, died Sept. 19, 2022, at age 91. (CNS photo/Greg Tarczynski)



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Retired Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza, the longtime bishop of Galveston-Houston and a tireless social justice advocate throughout his priesthood, episcopacy and in retirement, died Sept. 19. He was 91.

He lived at the Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza Retirement Residence, a priest retirement home of about 18 residents.

The Beaumont, Texas, native served as bishop of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston from 1985 to 2006 and was made archbishop in 2004, when the diocese was elevated to the status of archdiocese by St. John Paul II.

Fiorenza also was a former president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops-U.S. Catholic Conference, now called the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, serving in the role from 1998 to 2001.

"Archbishop Fiorenza was known to be a champion of civil rights and a tireless worker in overcoming the presence of racism in our community. He was also known as a great promoter of genuine renewal in the church, and in making the teachings of the Second Vatican Council known," said Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo.

The cardinal succeeded Fiorenza as head of the archdiocese in 2006.

Fiorenza's funeral arrangements are pending and will be announced when they are finalized.

Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez, president of the USCCB, said he learned of the retired prelate's death "with great sadness."

"Those who worked with him have expressed that his leadership embodied his love, dedication and tireless service to the church," Gomez said.

"I offer my prayers and sympathy to Archbishop Fiorenza's family, friends, and the many people whose lives he touched through his ministry over the years as a priest, and then as bishop. May the Lord grant him eternal rest," he said.

Fiorenza also served on the U.S. bishops' Administrative Committee in the mid-1990s, and was conference vice president for a three-year term, 1995-1998, before he was elected to a three-year term as conference president.

He also served as a member of a bishops' committee on Black Catholics, was on the board member of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and was a trustee of the University of St. Thomas in Houston.

During his years as a bishop and archbishop and in retirement, Fiorenza was an advocate for social justice issues and a supporter of interfaith collaboration for positive social change across all social and economic borders.

He often spoke out against the death penalty -- in a state with a high number of executions.

In a 2001 report at the end of his term as bishops' conference president, Fiorenza said he was gratified about the increasing Catholic opposition to the death penalty, especially among young people.

He also praised the bishops for approving a document supporting the renewal of the criminal justice system, with a special focus on capital punishment.

He was "a pastoral bishop who, through his example, mentored many to work toward justice," said Karen Clifton, founding executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network and currently executive coordinator of Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition.

He led "with a prayerful, courageous stance for the least among us without fear of opposition," she told the Texas Catholic Herald, the archdiocesan newspaper, in an interview in February 2021.

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Clifton noted that Fiorenza never fatigued in his passion for justice, "which continuously gives us courage to follow in his shadow and join him in pushing forward one of the many issues he champions," she said. "I can still hear his voice in my ears, as he on numerous occasions, firmly grasped my arm and said, 'Someone is going to have to do something about this (the death penalty)!'"

He also encouraged the church to be an active voice against racism.

"For the religious community to remain silent at this pivotal moment is a violation of their belief," Fiorenza once said. "If religious people are true to their own beliefs, then this pivotal moment will truly be a moment of great, great progress."

During the tumultuous summer of 2020, one marked with nationwide civil unrest following the death of George Floyd, Fiorenza said his longtime efforts for justice were just a "stepping stone" to achieving the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream."

He made the comments at a Juneteenth discussion about justice, equality and respect with other faith leaders.

"We haven't completed the walk yet. The journey is still going on, but we've made significant progress in the last 20, 30 years or more, but there's still a lot of social injustice," Fiorenza said. "We can't stop now. We have to keep going."

In September 2005, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Fiorenza was appointed chairman of a task force created by the U.S. bishops to coordinate the Catholic response to recovery efforts in the devastated regions hit hard by the hurricane.

Some days after it was formed, the work of the task force was expanded to address problems created by Hurricane Rita.

In a report to the bishops during their November 2005 general assembly, Fiorenza harshly criticized the federal government's response to hurricane victims. He said that church officials got the "run around" from the Federal Emergency Management Agency when they wanted to know what federal aid plans were.

"It was clear to me that not a whole lot of help was coming from FEMA," he said.

Joseph Anthony Fiorenza was born Jan. 25, 1931, in Beaumont, the second of four sons of Anthony and Grace (Galiano) Fiorenza. His father emigrated from Sicily at age 10, and his mother was the daughter of Sicilian immigrants.

He attended St. Anthony High School in Beaumont, where he was football team captain and senior class president. He had skipped a grade, so he graduated from high school at age 16 in 1947. He then studied at St. Mary's Seminary in La Porte, Texas.

He was ordained a priest for the Galveston-Houston Diocese in 1954. In 1979, he was named bishop of San Angelo, Texas, and then was named to head the Galveston-Houston Diocese in December 1984 and was installed in February 1985.

The pope's elevation of the diocese to an archdiocese in 2004 reflected the area's rapid population growth. Currently, the 10-county archdiocese has more than 1.7 million Catholics, making it the diocese with the largest Catholic population in the state of Texas and the fifth largest in the United States.

Pope Benedict XVI accepted Fiorenza's resignation Feb. 26, 2006. When he turned 75, he submitted his resignation to the pope as required by canon law.

At a news conference to announce his retirement and his successor, then-Coadjutor Archbishop DiNardo, Fiorenza said: "The church has a very wise rule about bishops retiring at 75."

The rule ensures that the local church receives an infusion of "new vigor, new ideas and new leadership," he added.

Fiorenza said he felt "truly blessed to have had the opportunity to have shepherded this wonderful archdiocese" and looked forward to getting back to "the life of a priest," administering the sacraments and celebrating Mass.