News

A light-skinned Black man speaks behind a lecturn and in front of a crucifix

Auxiliary Bishop Fernand (Ferd) J. Cheri III of New Orleans delivers his homily during the annual Black History Month Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York Feb. 5, 2017. Cheri died March 21, 2023, at Chateau de Notre Dame in New Orleans following a lengthy illness. He was 71. The New Orleans native had served as auxiliary bishop of New Orleans since 2015.(OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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New Orleans — March 23, 2023

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Bishop Fernand (Ferd) Joseph Cheri III, a New Orleans native who had served since 2015 as auxiliary bishop of New Orleans, died March 21 at Chateau de Notre Dame in New Orleans following a lengthy illness. He was 71.

Ordained to the episcopacy March 23, 2015, at St. Louis Cathedral, the late prelate was one of seven active African American bishops in the U.S.

A solemn vesper service will take place at 5 p.m. March 31 at Notre Dame Seminary followed by three hours of visitation. On April 1 at St. Louis Cathedral, two hours of visitation will precede the 11 a.m. funeral Mass for Cheri.

Cheri served most recently as administrator of St. Peter Claver Parish in New Orleans until kidney and heart problems forced him to step away from active ministry. He was born with one kidney and had been on dialysis three days a week for several months.

He was hospitalized after attending the national Lyke Conference for Black Catholics last June, and he began dialysis several months later and was dealing with a serious heart condition.

"He has been called home to the Lord," New Orleans Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond said in a message to priests, religious and laity of the archdiocese. "We mourn his death and thank God for his life and ministry."

The archbishop said Cheri started his vocational journey in the Archdiocese of New Orleans "as a seminarian, as a priest and as a pastor" and had directed a "very dedicated ministry."

"And then, he heard God's call to join the Franciscans and was a valued member of the Franciscan community," Aymond said. "We were delighted to receive him back into the Archdiocese of New Orleans as auxiliary bishop in 2015, and I have enjoyed working with him in sharing episcopal ministry and shepherding God's people."

The late bishop was ordained a New Orleans archdiocesan priest May 20, 1978, by Archbishop Philip M. Hannan. In 1992, then-Fr.-Cheri entered the novitiate of the Franciscans' Sacred Heart Province. He professed solemn vows in the order Aug. 26, 1996, and served mostly in Illinois in various ministries, including as a high school chaplain, guidance counselor, choir director and campus minister. He also was pastor of a Nashville, Tennessee, parish from 1996- 2002; during that time he also was a member of the provincial council for his Franciscan province (1999-2002).

In 2015, when Pope Francis named him an auxiliary bishop of New Orleans, he had been director of campus ministry at Quincy University in Quincy, Illinois, and as vicar of the Holy Cross Friary in Quincy since 2011.

"We saw him not only as a vocal advocate for African American Catholics and advocating for our needs, but also as a shepherd to the world," said Ansel Augustine, director of the New Orleans archdiocesan Office of Black Catholic Ministries. "When you think of bishops being shepherds, you see someone who cares about people, one on one. When you talked to him, you felt like you were the only person in the world that mattered even though he might have had eight million other things going on."

Augustine told the Clarion Herald, New Orleans' archdiocesan newspaper, "Bishop Cheri's charism -- and maybe it's the Franciscan thing of hospitality – was something you felt with him. I think that's why so many people loved him."

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In 2020, after the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis, Cheri led a peaceful march of 250 from the archdiocesan chancery building to Notre Dame Seminary. The prayer service was called "Requiem for the Black Children of God."

"Enough is enough," he said from the steps of the seminary, where he did his theological studies. "This scene drains our spirits and clouds the union of the human family.

"As toxic as the crossroads of life are these days, will we have the courage and wisdom to stay vigilant amidst … the gross violence and abuse by law enforcement? This is not a time for the faint of heart but for the courageous."

In a 2018 address honoring New Orleans' tricentennial, Cheri traced the history of the Black Catholic church in New Orleans and praised the Sisters of the Holy Family, founded in 1842 by Venerable Henriette Delille, a free woman of color; the Knights and Ladies of St. Peter Claver; the Office of Black Catholic Ministries; and the Institute of Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana, founded in 1980 to explore Scripture and church teachings from both "a righteous Black consciousness and an authentic Catholic tradition."

"These individuals and moments challenged the Catholic community of the Archdiocese of New Orleans to not only change the narrative of the church, but to affirm that we share common journeys together," Cheri said. "We were called to rise above the Code Noir and Jim Crow laws of our times that supported the politics of

fear and anger and the foundation of racism in the South."

Fernand (Ferd) Joseph Cheri III was born Jan. 28, 1952, to Fernand Jr. and Gladys Cheri. He received his high school education at St. John Vianney Preparatory Seminary in New Orleans. He went on to study at St. Joseph Seminary College in Covington, Louisiana, and Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans.

His father was an Army veteran whose full-time job was delivering mail. He worked extra jobs to keep the children fed and in Catholic school uniforms. After finishing his regular mail route at 3 p.m., his father would drive to St. Mary's Academy to do evening maintenance work. Later, he even helped build classroom buildings at the school.

Gladys Cheri,who squeezed every nickel out of her husband's salary, somehow made it all work. She also worked for many years cooking for the Sisters of the Holy Family who staffed St. Mary’s Academy.

A lifelong singer, Bishop Cheri loved to break into song during a homily or whenever the mood struck. When he was just 3 years old, his mother recalled little Ferd, the first boy among her seven children, belting out a tune in their house on St. Anthony Street in New Orleans.

In a 2015 interview before his ordination, Cheri spoke about how he reveled in the gift of music and his vocation.

"The experience of becoming a bishop -- and how people are reacting to it -- I feel like I sang a solo that became the community's prayer," he told the Clarion Herald.