News

A Cathedral and its spire stretches into the sky with other high rises surrounding it

Guests file into Holy Name Cathedral for the installation of Archbishop Blase J. Cupich as the new archbishop in Chicago Nov. 18, 2014. (CNS photo/ Andrew Nelles, Reuters)



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Auxiliary Bishop Kevin M. Birmingham of Chicago, former secretary to Chicago Cardinal Blase J. Cupich, died unexpectedly Oct. 2 at age 51. He was just a few days shy of his 52nd birthday.

"He passed away in his sleep,'' archdiocesan spokesperson Yasmin Quiroz told local media. The Chicago Sun-Times daily newspaper reported that the cause of death "was unclear, and Quiroz said foul play was not suspected."

"The Church has lost a wonderful priest and bishop today and I lost a dear friend and valued colleague," Cupich said in a statement. "From the start of his ministry, Bishop Kevin Birmingham was a devoted and joyful priest. He felt called to serve Latino Catholics especially, and he learned Spanish in order to do so.

"He served in my office for six years as priest-secretary, always with dedication and attention to every detail, a role in which his reputation for kindness only grew," he continued. "May we honor his memory by continuing to do as he did, and model the love God has for his children in all we do."

Details regarding funeral arrangements will be forthcoming, according to the Archdiocese of Chicago.

The late bishop, ordained as a priest of the Chicago Archdiocese in 1997, was named an auxiliary bishop for his home archdiocese by Pope Francis Sept. 11, 2020, along with another archdiocesan priest and a Franciscan friar who has been serving in the archdiocese since 2005: Then-Fr. Jeffrey S. Grob and then-Fr. Robert J. Lombardo, a Franciscan Friar of the Renewal.

Grob had known his fellow auxiliary his whole priesthood, and they worked together when Grob was serving in the chancery. "He was genuine, personable, funny and pastoral. He had a pastor's heart," he said in a statement. "Even after he became a bishop he did not put on airs, you saw the true man. His laughter was contagious, but in the moment, he could be genuinely concerned about an issue. Sincere and genuine: That is what drew people to him."

Lombardo shared that he always found "Bishop Kevin" a joy to be with. "He was dedicated to God and the Church and always had a very joyful spirit. He will be greatly missed," he said in a statement.

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Kevin Michael Birmingham was born Oct. 7, 1971, in Oak Lawn, Illinois, to Jeanette Ann Larsen and Joseph James Birmingham. He attended Quigley Preparatory Seminary in Chicago, Niles College Seminary in Niles and the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary in Mundelein.

He was ordained to the priesthood May 24, 1997, by then-Archbishop Francis E. George of Chicago, and a day later he celebrated his first solemn Mass at Our Lady of the Ridge Parish in Chicago Ridge.

As Birmingham stated in a Chicago Catholic interview in 2020, the Oblate Sisters of Jesus the Priest from Mexico City, who ministered at Niles College and Mundelein Seminary, arranged for his second Mass as a priest to be celebrated from the main altar at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. He made the trip to Mexico after his ordination to give thanks to Our Lady of Guadalupe, to whom he developed a devotion while he was in seminary, especially when he spent time in Morelia, Mexico, learning Spanish.

After his ordination to the priesthood, Birmingham served as associate pastor of St. Peter Claver Mission in Robbins, St. Benedict Parish in Blue Island and St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Orland Park. He was pastor at St. Anne Parish in Hazel Crest (2005-2011) and Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish on North Avenue in Chicago (2011-2014). He was administrative secretary to Cupich from 2014 to 2020.

In July 2020, he was appointed director of the archdiocese's Department of Parish Vitality and Mission for a year. On Sept. 11 of that year, he was named an auxiliary bishop. He was ordained a bishop Nov. 13, 2020, by Cupich at Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago and became episcopal vicar of the archdiocese's Vicariate IV.

In September of this year, after the retirement of Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Joseph N. Perry, Birmingham was assigned to oversee Vicariate VI.

Sarah Machaj, senior administrative assistant in the Archbishop's Office, worked with Birmingham from 2015 until 2020.

"Bishop Kevin lit up every room he walked into and brought with him his dry wit and just a little bit of mischief," Machaj said. "He was an incredibly hard worker, but never asked for recognition. He was humble, truly kind and had a laugh that was contagious. He was the most genuine person I've ever known, and he will be greatly missed."