News
Obituary



Mary Jo Tully, longtime chancellor for the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, is seen in 2012. Tully died Jan. 27, 2024, at age 86. (CNS/Catholic Sentinel)



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The first laywoman chancellor of a U.S. diocese — who also made a meaningful but unattributed contribution to the creation of the official Catechism of the Catholic Church — died Jan. 27.

In 1989, then-Archbishop William Levada named Mary Jo Tully chancellor for the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, where she would serve for 27 years before retiring in 2016.

Following her death at age 86 in Austin, Texas, colleagues recalled Tully's candor and care for people amid life's messiness, her talents as a catechist, wit and gravelly voice, and her fierce love for the church.

As part of her tenure and without fanfare, "she was able to help humanize the catechism," said Fr. Joseph Mulcrone, a friend for five decades and a former senior official in the Chicago Archdiocese. "She had many gifts."

Laypeople were not permitted to be chancellors until 1983, when Pope John Paul II promulgated the new Code of Canon Law, revised after the end of the Second Vatican Council. The post is often ranked as one of the top positions of authority after the bishop, and appointed individuals may hold a variety of responsibilities, though their principal function is to coordinate and maintain diocesan records.

"A chancellor can pretty much become whatever the bishop wants them to be, and Mary Jo served in a variety of ways masterfully — in the ecumenical office, as a liaison with health care providers, as a vicar for religious," retired Portland Archbishop John Vlazny, another longtime friend, said in an interview Jan. 29. "She gave her life to the church."

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Tully wrote columns on Scripture for the Catholic Sentinel, the Portland archdiocesan newspaper shuttered in 2022, and deepened Catholic-Jewish relationships in the city. She also helped priests and laity navigate tricky interpersonal conflicts and took the toughest crank calls at the Portland pastoral center, according to former colleagues.

The daughter of Irish Catholic parents, Tully was born in Chicago in 1937 and in the 1960s marched with civil rights activists in the South.

"She was a Chicago tough with a lot of soft spots, especially for kids and immigrants," said Ed Langlois, a longtime reporter and editor of the Sentinel.

"The Vietnamese immigrants in Portland considered her a grand matriarch, a view she openly indulged while all the time advocating for the community quietly and strongly," he said.

Langlois recalled how Tully could be a micromanager who made life grueling for editors and reporters. But she also was "a resolute champion of our newspaper in the halls of power," he said.

At her core, added Langlois, Tully was a catechist. "She lit up when teaching children, which she did whenever she could, despite crushing administrative duties."



Mary Jo Tully prays with children in her religious education class at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland, Oregon, in 1998. (CNS/Denise Hogan)

Prior to arriving in the West Coast city, Tully served as director of religious education in the Chicago Archdiocese, where she became fast friends with Mulcrone, then director of the archdiocese's Catholic Office of the Deaf.

In a recent interview with NCR, Mulcrone recounted a story Tully told him years ago.

She'd been asked to lead a program in Chicago for parents with children preparing for first Communion. It was a required event, and clearly not everyone was thrilled to be there, said Mulcrone.

"Mary Jo goes up to give the talk, and she spots this guy about three, four rows back who's got a look on his face like, 'What the heck am I doing here?'

"At the end of the presentation, he came up to her and this is what he said: 'Lady, I don't really know a damn, but if I could learn to believe the way you believe — that

would be everything. That is something I want for myself and my child.'

"And that's who Mary Jo was," said Mulcrone. "She was an absolute believer."

Tully came to Portland to interview for the post of religious education director, but Levada, archbishop from 1986 to 1995, offered her a job as assistant chancellor.

"When Levada began to work with her, he realized, well, this person is a jewel," said Vlazny. The following year, Tully became the first laywoman chancellor.

Ten years after the canonical change that opened up the position to laypeople, about 15% of chancellors in U.S. dioceses were women, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, affiliated with Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. A decade later, about 25% were women, with half women religious and the other half lay.



Mary Jo Tully poses with Archbishop John Vlazny and Vietnamese Catholics following a Mass in Portland, Oregon, in 2011. (CNS/Courtesy of Catholic Sentinel)

In 2016, the last year the center obtained data, more than 30% were female. Current dioceses with laywomen chancellors include San Diego; Syracuse, New York; and Stockton, California; all appointments were historic firsts.

Vlazny and Mulcrone highlighted how Tully made a mark on the catechism — the reference work seen as containing the church's essential teachings in regards to faith and morals.

"The Catechism of the Catholic Church we have today certainly bears the imprint of her touch," said Mulcrone.

In the 1980s, Levada was part of a small group of bishops working with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, future Pope Benedict XVI, on the catechism, and he is attributed with preparing the glossary.

"But that was a lot of Mary Jo's work," according to Vlazny.

"Mary Jo would not have bragged about it," Mulcrone said, "but I know for a fact there were plenty of late-night sessions and revisions, where Levada would send her stuff at night, asking what she thought about it. And she'd get back to him in the morning with her thoughts."

Levada came to the catechism as a theologian, "as someone who really knew the formal teaching of the church," said Mulcrone. "But Mary Jo came to the catechism saying, 'All of that is good and important, but you have to translate this into pastoral ministry.'

"She put human flesh, humanity, onto the bones of the catechism to make them something that could be more applied in pastoral situations in a parish," he said.



Archbishop John Vlazny shares a laugh with Mary Jo Tully in 2008. The two were close friends and kept up correspondence after Tully retired to Texas. (CNS/Catholic Sentinel/Gerry Lewin)

Serving under Portland Archbishops Levada, Francis George, Vlazny and Alexander Sample, Tully needed to understand diverse personalities and priorities, said Mulcrone.

"She said to me, 'Personalities come and go, the church remains,' " recalled the priest. "That was her attitude."

In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI gave Tully a Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice medal, one of the highest honors a pontiff can bestow upon members of the laity and religious orders, and the University of Portland awarded her an honorary doctorate in 2000.

When Tully retired, the Sentinel ran a reflection by Brian Doyle, an award-winning author and editor of the University of Portland's magazine.

"She worked as hard as anyone ever has for Catholics in Oregon, and she'll never get the credit she deserves, for the thousands of meetings attended, the thousands of complaints and insults handled, the thousands of dinners endured, the countless ministries and projects and programs overseen," wrote Doyle, who often took liberties with syntax, punctuation and sentence length.

"But then again she will never be forgotten," Doyle continued, "which is a greater compliment than mere recognition; the lean amused witty efficient blunt woman — who in so many ways was an incarnation of the Catholic idea in Oregon for nearly three decades — will always be a colorful thread in the fabric of the faith here."

Tully, who spent her retirement with family in Austin, will be interred in Chicago next to her mother.

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