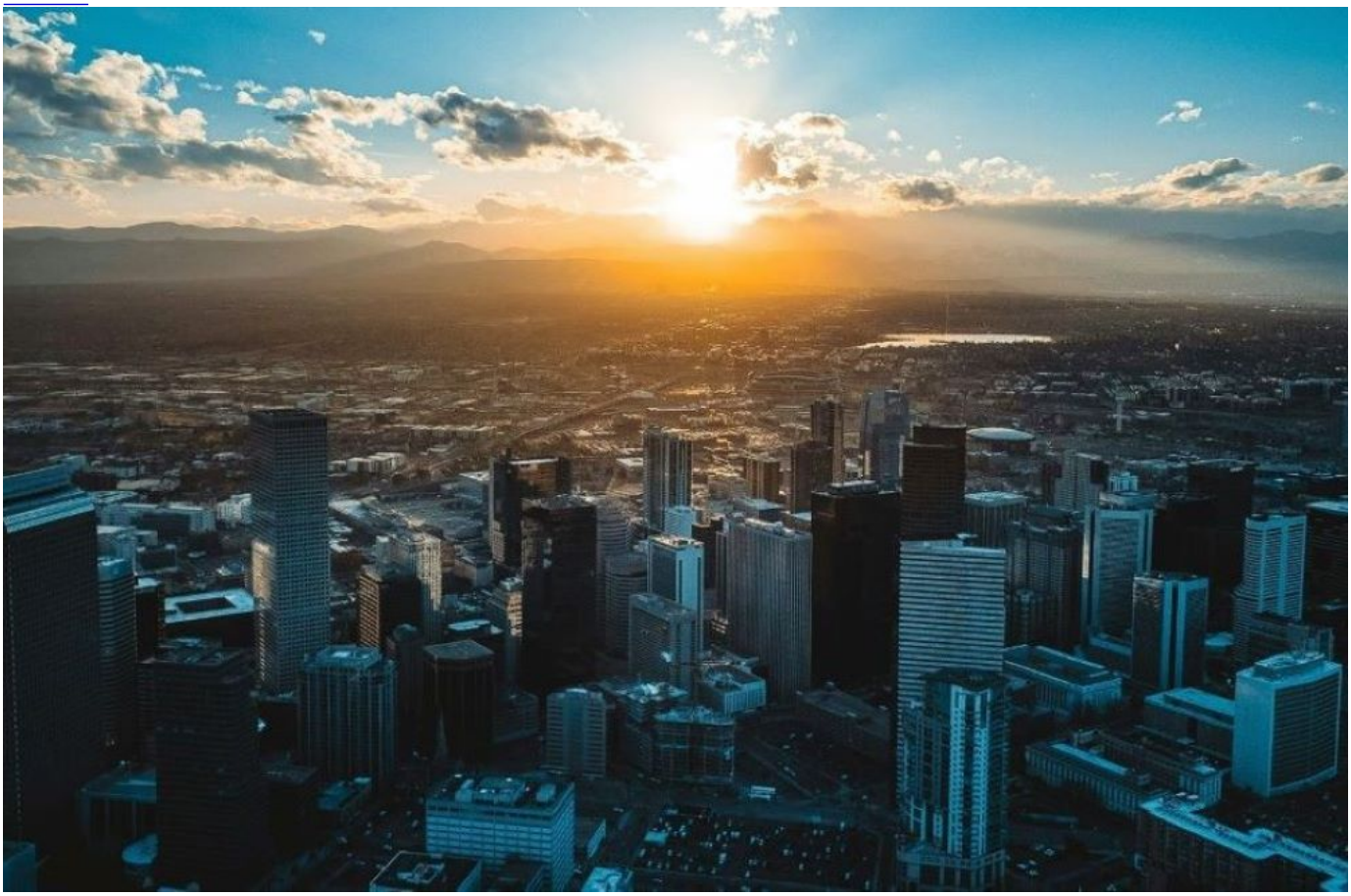
News



The sun sets behind the Denver skyline. (RNS/Unsplash/Nils Huenerfuerst)



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When the helicopter delivering Pope John Paul II to a Catholic youth festival descended into Denver's Mile High Stadium 32 years ago, the crowd's roar, the pilot later told papal biographer George Weigel, created turbulence he hadn't experienced since being under fire in the Vietnam War.

Denver was a curious choice to host World Youth Day. A handful of U.S. cities have deeper ties to the Catholic Church, while Denver was seen as not only not historically Catholic, but also not particularly religious. Its then-Archbishop (later Cardinal) J. Francis Stafford was committed nonetheless to bringing a wave of evangelization to Denver.

Under Stafford and his successors, Archbishops Charles Chaput and Samuel Aquila, Denver became a hub for influential conservative Catholic evangelizing ministries such as the Fellowship of Catholic University Students and the Augustine Institute. When The Pillar, an outlet focused on Catholicism's inside baseball, launched in 2021 with a controversial investigation into Catholic priests' use of a gay dating app, it was with the help of millions from Denver Catholic donors. The three archbishops that fostered this milieu are seen, depending on a given Catholic point of view, as defenders of church orthodoxy or else combative culture warriors.



Denver Archbishop-designate James Golka, shown in 2021 (RNS/Courtesy of Diocese of Colorado Springs)

But as Pope Leo XIV is intent on pursuing unity and a lower temperature, many U.S. dioceses are still led by bishops placed by Pope Benedict XVI, nicknamed "God's Rottweiler." Leo's February pick for Denver, Bishop James Golka, who will be installed March 25, may illustrate how he plans to approach the church's polarization.

Golka, who has headed the diocese of Colorado Springs for the past five years, has already been embraced across the spectrum of constituencies in the archdiocese, which covers 25 counties in northern Colorado, and has the potential to unify its 600,000 Catholics.

Aquila, who has led the archdiocese since 2012, has been beloved by many Catholic leaders in Denver. Darren Walsh, who heads Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of

Denver, said Aquila helped the organization open hundreds of temporary shelter units to migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. "He empowered Catholic Charities to manage the needs of the people we were serving as we saw fit," Walsh said. "That was very helpful because it allowed us to be very nimble."

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Emma Ramirez, director of Respect Life Denver, said the outgoing archbishop often participated in the group's anti-abortion initiatives, joining a eucharistic procession around a Planned Parenthood clinic, for instance, last October and a month later celebrating a Mass at an anti-abortion symposium for high schoolers. "We received a really awesome, supportive letter from him to encourage priests and the lay faithful to participate in our mission," she said. "That was huge."

Weigel, a friend to both Chaput and Aquila, told RNS in an email that the two "built a model archdiocese, not only in its evangelical energy but in its governance."

Tim Glemkowski, former CEO of the National Eucharistic Congress who lives in Littleton, Colorado, wrote in a LinkedIn post of Aquila that "arguably, his greatest achievement … was how he transformed the culture of the pastoral center to one that is healthy and fruitful."

But Aquila frustrated many progressive Catholics with his policy toward LGBTQ+ Catholics — in 2022, he instructed Catholic schools not to enroll transgender or queer students — and his habit of assigning conservative pastors to historically progressive parishes. At Most Precious Blood, a church near the University of Denver, a priest sent by Aquila removed "feminist" art and struck "unsuitable" songs from Sunday services. In his homilies, he accused those in the pews of feeling "offended that they need to be saved by Jesus." Parishioners sent the archbishop a petition of protest with nearly 900 signatures.



Denver Archbishop Samuel Aquila celebrates Easter Mass during a broadcast of services because of the coronavirus, on Sunday, April 12, 2020, in Denver. (RNS/AP/David Zalubowski)

At St. Ignatius Loyola, a historically Black Catholic parish led by Jesuits for nearly a century, parishioners struggled to adjust after the Jesuits left in 2023 and Aquila replaced them with the more traditional Community of St. John. The new pastor, Fr. Francis Therese Krautter, had reportedly denied Communion to two women at his previous church for wearing rainbow face masks in solidarity with a Catholic school teacher who had been dismissed for being in a same-sex relationship.

Rosa Salazar, who then led a gospel choir at Loyola, said Krautter replaced the parish's gospel music program with Gregorian chant and Western classical music. Last fall, parishioners were stunned to find the "Lead Me, Guide Me" Black Catholic hymnals missing from the pews and thrown in the dumpster. Krautter said in a

church bulletin message that the hymnals were discarded due to an "unfortunate misunderstanding," but declined to replace them, Salazar said.

"There's just two (historically Black Catholic parishes) in Denver, and it just seems pretty sad to me that we can't have gospel music at Loyola anymore," she added.

Neither Krautter nor the archdiocese responded to requests for comment.



The former Bishop Machebeuf High School in Denver (RNS/Google Maps)

But the frustration with Aquila has not been limited to progressives. Last year, the archdiocese closed Bishop Machebeuf High School, a majority-minority high school in east Denver focused on classical education, typically favored by more conservative Catholics. Students were encouraged to switch to St. John Paul the Great High School, which is operated independently of the archdiocese, but purportedly more financially stable.

Harold Siegel, former principal of Machebeuf, said just months before that the school had passed its mission assessment with "flying colors" only halfway through a renewal plan and had been approached by a national organization to serve as a

model for Catholic superintendents interested in classical education. After making its decision, the archdiocese did not give the school the opportunity to fundraise, Siegel said, despite expectations that it could pull in at least $10 million.

The only remaining archdiocesan high school is not a classical school and at the time of its last demographic survey, in the 2017-2018 school year, was majority white.

Former administrators at Machebeuf have also pointed out that two members of John Paul the Great's board of trustees sat on the archdiocesan finance council that recommended withdrawing archdiocesan funding for Machebeuf, alleging that Machebeuf's closure was at least in part intended to buttress low enrollment at John Paul the Great. Staff, the administrators said, were required to direct students to John Paul the Great without mentioning other Catholic schools.

Siegel described the closure as "devastating to the apostolic mission" of the archdiocese, noting Machebeuf's high rate of vocations, and called it the only Catholic school in Denver where "the bigotry of soft expectations" does not keep Latino and African students from the "rich intellectual tradition" of classical education.

"The diocese was abandoning classical education," said Robert Farris, former dean of students at Machebeuf.

John Paul the Great and its trustees on the archdiocesan finance council did not respond to requests for comment. Nor did Aquila or Golka.

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Farris, who now lives in Colorado Springs, has hope for Golka. "He did present himself as very pastoral and talked to all the kids who were getting confirmed in a way that I'd never seen from Aquila at any of the times he visited our high school at Machebeuf over four years."

Glemkowski, formerly of the National Eucharistic Congress, also praised the appointment, writing, "It is hard to think of a better shepherd Pope Leo could have given to the church of northern Colorado."

The new archbishop is also raising hopes for the LGBTQ+ community, based on his response to the November 2022 mass shooting at Club Q, a LGBTQ+ nightclub in Colorado Springs, that killed five people and injured more than two dozen others.

In a statement after the attack, Golka deemed the violence "especially troubling," saying that "any time specific members of the population are targeted for violence, we should all be concerned." He urged prayers for the victims and their families and emphasized Catholic teaching on the dignity of every human life.

Those who have worked with Golka in Colorado Springs said he has a reputation for collaborative leadership. Andy Barton, president and CEO of Catholic Charities of Central Colorado, said Golka backed the conversion of a property into 24 units of transitional housing for families experiencing homelessness. "He was a strong partner in that, providing his support and counsel along the way and making sure we were aligned with church teaching," said Barton.

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At a press conference in Colorado Springs last month, Golka talked about his love for celebrating Mass in Spanish and his desire to "walk with" and "support" immigrants.

Emphasizing both the right of nations to "defend" their borders and the right to seek refuge, Golka said, "If someone shows up at my door in need, as a Catholic I care for them as best as I can."

Jesuit Fr. Scott Hendrickson, president of Regis University in Denver, told RNS, "I'm very sure that immigration is high on Archbishop-designate Golka's radar and that it will be an important issue for him as well."

Canfield, who said he got to know the archbishop-designate while discerning the priesthood in Nebraska, said he plans to attend the installation at the Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Denver on March 25, ready to welcome a new archbishop, and old friend, to his community.

"I think it will be a seamless transition," Canfield said. "He very much falls in love with the people that he's around."