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Cardinal Bevilacqua, retired Philadelphia archbishop, dies at age 88

by Catholic News Service



Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua addresses the congregation during the installation of his successor -- then Cardinal-designate Justin Rigali -- as archbishop of Philadelphia on Oct. 7, 2003. Cardinal Bevilacqua died Jan. 31 at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia. He was 88. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

PHILADELPHIA -- Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua, retired archbishop of Philadelphia, died Jan. 31 at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, where he resided.

According to the Philadelphia Archdiocese, he died in his sleep at 9:15 p.m. He was 88. The archdiocese said he had been battling dementia and an undisclosed form of cancer.

Cardinal Bevilacqua headed the archdiocese from February 1988 to October 2003.

"I was greatly saddened to learn of the death of my predecessor Cardinal Bevilacqua," said Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia. "I encourage all Catholics in the archdiocese to join me in praying for the repose of his soul and that God will comfort his family as they mourn his loss. Cardinal Bevilacqua

has been called home by God; a servant of the Lord who loved Jesus Christ and his people."

"Cardinal Bevilacqua's death comes at a time when the archdiocese is facing extraordinary challenges," he said. "During this difficult period, I invite all of our people to come together in prayer for a renewal of our church and her mission."

Following a private viewing at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood, Archbishop Chaput will receive the cardinal's body at the Cathedral Basilica of SS. Peter and Paul in Philadelphia in the early evening Feb. 6, with a public viewing to follow.

A public viewing will precede the funeral Mass Feb. 7. Archbishop Chaput will celebrate the Mass, and Msgr. Louis D'Addezio will be the homilist. The rite of committal will follow in the crypt below the main altar.

Pope Benedict XVI mourned the death of the cardinal, expressing his "heartfelt condolences" in a telegram sent to Archbishop Chaput.

The pope praised the late cardinal's "long-standing commitment to social justice and the pastoral care of immigrants, and his expert contribution to the revision of the church's law in the years following the Second Vatican Council."

His death leaves the College of Cardinals with 191 members, 107 of whom are under the age of 80 and, therefore, eligible to vote in a conclave.

Just a day before his death a Philadelphia judge ruled that Cardinal Bevilacqua was competent and could be a witness in the upcoming trial of a Philadelphia priest, Msgr. William J. Lynn. The priest is accused of having failed to protect children from two priests who were under his direction when he served as secretary of the clergy.

But Msgr. Lynn's defense lawyers said the cardinal could no longer recognize the priest who had been his longtime aide.

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In February 2011, Cardinal Bevilacqua and other archdiocesan officials were named in a civil lawsuit filed anonymously by a 28-year-old man. The man claimed he had been abused and named his alleged abusers in the suit as well as the cardinal and others he said failed to prevent the abuse. They included Cardinal Justin Rigali, who is now retired but succeeded Cardinal Bevilacqua as head of the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

The civil suit was filed four days after the Philadelphia district attorney released a new report by a grand jury investigating clergy sex abuse in the archdiocese. In response to the report, which brought criminal indictments and followed a 2005 report, Cardinal Rigali, calling sex abuse of children a crime and "always wrong and always evil," outlined new actions to respond to abuse allegations.

Anthony Joseph Bevilacqua was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., June 17, 1923, and ordained a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn June 11, 1949, after studies at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, N.Y.

He had a master's degree in political science from Columbia University in New York, a doctorate in canon law from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and a doctorate in civil law from St. John's

University in Jamaica, N.Y. Admitted to the New York and Pennsylvania bars and to the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1988, he may have been the only cardinal in U.S. history accredited to argue cases before that body.

He was diocesan chancellor and founding director of the Brooklyn Migration and Refugee Office when he was named an auxiliary bishop of Brooklyn in 1980. He was ordained a bishop Nov. 24 of that year.

Three years later, he was named bishop of Pittsburgh and installed Dec. 12, 1983.

Earlier that year, he was the Vatican-appointed delegate to resolve a dispute between Mercy Sister Agnes Mary Mansour and then-Archbishop Edmund C. Szoka of Detroit. The dispute arose over the nun's position as state director of social services in Michigan, a post that involved funding abortions.

When then-Bishop Bevilacqua told her she had to leave her job or her order if she would not publicly oppose state-funded abortions, she resigned from the Mercy Sisters.

In the early 1980s, as chairman of the Committee on Canonical Affairs, he led the U.S. bishops through the first phases of implementing the new 1983 Code of Canon Law and making appropriate U.S. adaptations.

As head of the Committee on Migration, he pushed for quick government action in 1983 to accommodate the needs of tens of thousands of Cambodian refugees. He regularly fought for more generous laws and policies to deal with undocumented immigrants.

In Pittsburgh, he caused a national stir in 1986 when he said women could not be included in the Holy Thursday ritual washing of feet in parishes. A top Vatican official said his decision was in accord with the church rubric, which refers only to men, but at Bishop Bevilacqua's request the U.S. bishops' liturgy committee studied the issue and said a "variation" that included women in the ritual, in wide use around the country, was also legitimate. Bishop Bevilacqua then sent the committee's memo to all his pastors, asking them to use their own judgment on the matter.

He was a papally appointed member of the 1987 world Synod of Bishops, on the role of laity in the church and world.

In Philadelphia, one of his first major decisions was to launch a capital campaign to create an education fund that would offset yearly deficits in the archdiocese's extensive Catholic school system.

In January 1998, with racial tensions flaring in several areas of Philadelphia, Cardinal Bevilacqua issued a pastoral letter on racism called "Healing Through Faith and Truth." It was regarded as one of the most important documents written during his tenure as archbishop of Philadelphia.

"Racism is an intrinsic evil that separates us from God," he said in his letter. "It is a moral disease and it is contagious." The cardinal called on "Catholics and all people of good will to pray that God will cast out the demon of racism wherever it exists."

He initiated a renewal process called Catholic Faith and Life 2000 to bring non-practicing Catholics back to the church. The renewal process culminated on Oct. 22, 2000, with 40,000 Catholics participating in a candlelight procession on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia.

He served many years on the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities and spoke out often to condemn abortion and defend unborn life. He was elected chairman of the committee in 2001.

Cardinal Bevilacqua made spiritual renewal of the people a top priority and regularly visited parishes, schools, hospitals, prisons and other institutions in the archdiocese. He reached out to people of all faiths through his visits to hospitals and prisons as well as through his ecumenical and interreligious efforts.

He hosted a weekly radio call-in program, "Live With Cardinal Bevilacqua," which aired on WZZD-AM from 1995 to 2000.

He was a former member of the Vatican Congregation for Saints' Causes, the Congregation for Clergy, the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers and the commission of cardinals that oversees the Vatican bank.

He also was a former chairman of the Papal Foundation, a U.S. foundation dedicated to providing financial assistance to the Holy See.

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