

Cardinal Francis George, former head of U.S. Catholic bishops, dies at 78

by [David Gibson](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue

Cardinal Francis George, former head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, died April 17 at age 78, after years of living with cancer. He was the first man to retire rather than die as archbishop of Chicago.

George, a Chicago native, became archbishop in 1997. He was seen by some as an antidote to the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who advocated a common ground Catholicism. In many ways, he served as a point man for Pope John Paul II, who was by then ailing, and for John Paul's doctrinal watchdog and theological adviser, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who would be elected Pope Benedict XVI in 2005. Longtime Vatican expert John Allen called George the "American Ratzinger."

"George's clear and strongly stated positions on issues such as abortion, contraception, and the Catholic liturgy could be either celebrated or reviled—and he drew both reactions, repeatedly—but they could never be ignored," Allen wrote.

George made a name for himself not only as one of the hierarchy's sharpest minds and most outspoken advocates for orthodoxy, but as someone who could get things done.

After the clergy sexual abuse scandal broke in 2002, George helped push through an unprecedented set of policies, including a zero tolerance rule for abusive priests. Yet he himself got snagged by those policies when abuse scandals involving some of his own clergy erupted on his watch.

George also helped push through controversial changes to the language of the mass, and he led the U.S. bishops from 2007 to 2010. He became a force behind the hierarchy's battles with the Obama administration over issues such as health-care reform, contraception, gay rights, and religious liberty. He retired in November 2014.

In a 1998 speech he said that "liberal Catholicism . . . has shown itself unable to pass on the faith in its integrity and [is] inadequate, therefore, in fostering the joyful self-surrender called for in Christian marriage, in consecrated life, in ordained priesthood." He said, "It no longer gives life."

In one of George's final interviews, with America magazine's Sister Mary Ann Walsh (herself battling cancer), he began by reflecting on this stage of life and being a retired archbishop facing a terminal illness.

"I have a sense that I'm being taught to let go," he said, "to put aside many of the concerns that have shaped my life, even as a bishop." —Religion News Service

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