

Catholic Review

Inspiring the Archdiocese of Baltimore

‘Light of hope’

Cardinal Keeler, basilica restorer, interfaith leader, dies at 86

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Cardinal William H. Keeler, 14th archbishop of Baltimore, an international leader in Catholic-Jewish relations and the driving force behind the restoration of America’s first cathedral, died March 23 at his residence at St. Martin’s Home for the Aged in Catonsville. He was 86.

Cardinal Keeler served as the spiritual shepherd of the Baltimore Archdiocese from 1989 until his retirement in 2007.

Archbishop William E. Lori, one of Cardinal Keeler’s two successors, said one of the great blessings of his life was coming to know Cardinal Keeler, whom he met when the cardinal was bishop of the Diocese of Harrisburg, Pa., and Archbishop Lori was priest-secretary to Washington Cardinal James Hickey.

Among the cardinal’s accomplishments, the archbishop highlighted “the wonderful visit of Pope St. John Paul II to Baltimore in 1995, the restoration of the Basilica and the creation of Partners in Excellence which has helped thousands of young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods to receive a sound Catholic education.”

Pennsylvania roots

Born in San Antonio, Texas, and raised in Lebanon, Pa., Cardinal Keeler was ordained a priest in Rome July 17, 1955. He served as an assistant pastor before taking on other assignments as secretary to Harrisburg Bishop George L. Leech and as a “peritus,” or special advisor, during Second Vatican Council meetings in Rome.

He was named vice chancellor and then vicar general and auxiliary bishop of the Harrisburg Diocese. St. John Paul II appointed him bishop of Harrisburg Nov. 10, 1983, and archbishop of Baltimore April 11, 1989. The pope elevated Cardinal Keeler to the College of Cardinals in 1994. His episcopal motto was, “Do the work of an evangelist.”

Putting Baltimore on the map

Father Michael White, pastor of the Church of the Nativity in Timonium and his first priest-secretary in Baltimore, said Cardinal Keeler “put Baltimore on the map in the Catholic Church.”

Father White noted that in addition to the papal visit, Cardinal Keeler hosted spiritual gatherings in Baltimore in the late 1990s with St. Teresa of Kolkata and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. Leaders within the Catholic Church and from other faith traditions regularly visited him in Baltimore. “Not a day went by” when bishops from other parts of the country didn’t call for the cardinal’s advice, Father White said.

“Pope John Paul loved Cardinal Keeler,” Father White remembered. “He used to call the cardinal ‘Baltimore.’”

The 1995 papal visit to Baltimore – at the invitation of Cardinal Keeler – was one of the cardinal’s proudest moments. The pope celebrated Mass at Oriole Park at Camden Yards, visited the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen and the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, shared a meal at Our Daily Bread and encouraged seminarians at St. Mary’s Seminary in Roland Park.

A prodigious fundraiser, Cardinal Keeler established what is now known as the



Archbishop’s Annual Appeal. In 1997, he launched a major capital campaign known as Heritage of Hope that raised more than \$137 million from more than 39,000 gifts and pledges.

The cardinal also established the Partners in Excellence program, which provides tuition scholarships for children in inner-city Catholic schools. Since its inception in 1996, Partners in Excellence has provided more than \$26 million in tuition assistance.

Basilica restoration

One of the cardinal’s major efforts was the \$32 million campaign to restore the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore.

After more than two years of construction, the building was rededicated on Nov. 4, 2006 – 200 years after the basilica’s cornerstone was laid. More than 240 bishops from across the nation gathered in Baltimore for the celebration.

Cardinal Keeler, who once said there is “no place on earth like the basilica,” received the personal blessing of St. John Paul II for the restoration.

A few years after the basilica was rededicated, the Pope John Paul II Prayer Garden was established.

Abuse crisis

Just as he worked to rebuild historic structures and respect among people of different faiths, Cardinal Keeler also worked to rebuild trust in the wake of the clergy child abuse crisis that broke in 2001.

He strengthened archdiocesan policies related to child and youth protection, requiring all employees and volunteers who work with children to undergo safe-environment training through a new program called “STAND.” Fingerprinting of employees became mandatory, and background checks were also required for both employees and volunteers.

In September 2002, Cardinal Keeler became one of only a handful of bishops in the nation to release the names of clergy – living and dead – who had been “credibly accused” of the sexual abuse of children. Fifty-seven names were published in the *Catholic Review*.

Cardinal Keeler became the first cardinal in the nation to take the witness stand in a criminal trial related to the clergy sex abuse scandal when he testified for the defense in the attempted murder of Maurice J. Blackwell, a defrocked priest accused of sexually abusing Dontee D. Stokes. Stokes shot and wounded Blackwell, but a Baltimore City Circuit Court jury found Stokes not guilty in 2003.

Cardinal Keeler had first suspended Blackwell from ministry in 1993 when Stokes accused him of sexual abuse, but later reinstated Blackwell as pastor of St. Edward in Baltimore despite a recommendation to the contrary from a lay review board.

On the witness stand, the cardinal said he regretted his action in reinstating Blackwell.

In 2004, the cardinal led a “day of atonement,” asking forgiveness for sins the church had committed against victims of clerical sex abuse.

With a keen interest in promoting

pro-life, education and social justice, Cardinal Keeler was active in the legislative process, serving as chairman of the Maryland Catholic Conference, the Annapolis-based legislative lobbying arm of the state’s bishops. He worked to advance initiatives such as funding for non-religious textbooks and technology in the state’s nonpublic schools.

Cardinal Keeler met and prayed with convicted murderer Wesley Eugene Baker on death row in 2005, using the dramatic visit to call on then-Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. to spare Baker’s life. The plea was ignored and Baker was executed one week after the cardinal prayed with him.

Cardinal Keeler was elected president of what is today known as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 17, 1992, after serving three years as vice president.

Cardinal Keeler gave his blessing to several innovative educational programs within the Baltimore archdiocese, including one for children with special needs – PRIDE (Pupils Receiving Inclusive Diversified Education.)

During his tenure, several Catholic schools closed. Several others opened, including St. Ignatius Loyola Academy, Mother Seton Academy, Sisters Academy, Cristo Rey Jesuit High School and School of the Incarnation in Gambrills.

Diverse church

The cardinal reached out to African-American Catholics, Hispanics and young people. Therese Wilson Favors, former archdiocesan director of the Office of African American Catholic Ministries, noted that the cardinal established the office as the primary focus of evangelization and leadership development within the community. He supported efforts such as Operation Faith Lift, an evangelization effort in black parishes; and Harambee, a youth program. He established the Office of Hispanic Ministry and made efforts

to bring more Spanish-speaking priests to the archdiocese.

Through Cardinal Keeler’s leadership, the Archdiocese of Baltimore established a sister diocese relationship with the Diocese of Gonaives, Haiti, in 1997.

The cardinal

ARRANGEMENTS

MONDAY, MARCH 27

1 p.m.: Reception of body at Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore

1-7 p.m.: Public viewing

7 p.m.: Vespers – Office for the Dead

TUESDAY, MARCH 28

9 a.m.: Reception of body at Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland

9 a.m.-1 p.m.: Public viewing

2 p.m.: Mass of Christian Burial at Cathedral

4:30 p.m.: Rite of Committal in crypt of Basilica

served as chairman of the eighth World Youth Day, held in Denver in 1993. In Baltimore, he started and participated in the youth and young adult pilgrimage, an annual event held the day before Palm Sunday. A former Eagle Scout, the cardinal was also a supporter of Scouting.

Cardinal Keeler, a champion of interfaith and ecumenical understanding, was named a member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 1994. He also served as episcopal moderator of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs from 1984 to 1987.

“He knew how to listen,” said Rabbi Joel Zaiman, rabbi emeritus of Chizuk Amuno Congregation, Baltimore. “He heard. He understood, and he responded genuinely and generously.”

Later years

Cardinal Keeler underwent knee replacement surgery in 2005, and brain surgery in 2006 following a car accident in Italy that resulted in the death of a friend, Father Bernard Quinn of Harrisburg.

Many of his family, friends and religious leaders from around the world gathered in Baltimore in 2011 to celebrate the cardinal’s 80th birthday.

“You have been and continue to be a star,” Archbishop Pietro Sambi, former apostolic nuncio to the United States, told Cardinal Keeler during the birthday celebration, “a light of hope, not only for the church, but also for the community at large.” ●



Cardinal Keeler embraces St. John Paul II at Oriole Park at Camden Yards during the pope’s historic 1995 visit to Baltimore.

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