

Archbishop May, led NCCB, dead of cancer

ST. LOUIS (CNS) — Archbishop John L. May, the retired archbishop of St. Louis who once headed the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, died March 24 after a 20-month fight with brain cancer.

The 71-year-old archbishop had headed the Archdiocese of St. Louis from 1980 until he resigned because of illness in December 1992. He lapsed into a coma March 13, one day before his successor, Archbishop Justin F. Rigali, arrived in St. Louis for his March 16 installation.

Archbishop May died at 11:50 p.m. March 24, just 10 minutes before the feast of the Annunciation and what would have been the 14th anniversary of his installation in St. Louis.

He was to be buried in the crypt of St. Louis Cathedral following a March 30 funeral Mass. Archbishop Rigali was to be the celebrant and Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago the homilist.

When Archbishop Rigali's appointment was announced Jan. 25, Archbishop May started to "let go," according to Monsignor Bernard F. Sandheinrich, one of several priests who spent time at the archbishop's bedside. "He felt at rest about handing over the responsibility to a successor."

As president of the NCCB and U.S. Catholic Conference in 1986-89, he was the bishops' top official when Pope John Paul II visited the United States in 1987.

Born in Evanston, Ill., March 31, 1922, John Lawrence May was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1947. After pastoral assignments, he was named in 1959 as general secretary and vice president of the Catholic Church Extension Society, a Chicago-based home mission aid agency. He was president of the society from 1967-70.

In 1967 he was named an auxiliary bishop of Chicago. He was vicar general in Chicago when he was appointed bishop of the Diocese of Mobile, Ala., newly created in 1969.

A strong advocate of financial accountability by church institutions, he was also episcopal moderator of the National Catholic Development Conference while he was bishop of Mobile.

He was chairman of the U.S. bishops' Communications Committee and a member of the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications in the early 1970s. He wrote a weekly column in his diocesan newspaper in Mobile, a practice he continued in St. Louis.

In a newspaper column in 1971, he urged the United States to get out of the Vietnam War "as fast as we can," arguing that "we are morally bound to stop the hopeless fighting."

That same year he sharply criticized Alabama's Gov. George Wallace for trying to block school integration in the state.

He was involved in the founding of Unda-USA, a national association of Catholics in the electronic media, and he addressed the organization's first general assembly in 1972.

Increasingly active in national affairs, in 1978 he was named head of an ad hoc committee of bishops to monitor problems in church-state relations after President Jimmy Carter expressed a desire for more information about church concerns regarding several government rulings or actions affecting Catholic institutions.

In January 1980 he was appointed to St. Louis. Four months later, some pro-life supporters accused him of being soft on abortion when he spoke out against pro-life demonstrations that involved violence against abortion clinics.

The controversy surfaced off and on, but Archbishop May reiterated his stand against such demonstrations. "It's not productive ... for us to break civil laws and actually seek arrest and engage in some kind of violence," he said in a 1986

interview.

In 1984 he headed an ad hoc committee of bishops on the Equal Rights Amendment, which at that time was one of the most divisive public-policy issues confronting the church. His committee recommended that the NCCB-USCC maintain neutrality — a position he described as "in the extreme middle."

He was vice president of the NCCB-USCC in 1983-86 and then had a three-year term as president. In the fall of 1987 he led the delegation of U.S. bishops attending the world Synod of Bishops on the role of the laity in the church and the world.

One of the most controversial developments during his presidency was the issuance of a statement on AIDS in December 1987 by the 50-bishop USCC

Administrative Board.

Although many bishops and theologians defended the document's language on toleration of accurate information about condoms within the context of sound moral values in publicly sponsored educational efforts to combat AIDS, some criticized it as implying that the church could tolerate the promotion of condom use. Eventually the bishops resolved the flap by drawing up a new statement, approved by the whole body of bishops, which developed the moral principles involved more clearly and completely.

Archbishop May had vigorous good health and maintained a busy schedule until the summer of 1992. He experienced the first symptom of his cancer in June 1992 when he woke to find his right hand paralyzed.



AP/Wide World Photos

Coming to the defense

Paul Hill (left), director of Defensive Action, a Pensacola, Fla.-based group founded after the shooting of Dr. David Gunn, addresses the media March 24 outside the Sedgwick County Courthouse in Wichita, Kan. Roxann Meyer (center) and Danna Hinderliter are trying to shout down Hill. Hill was in Wichita attending the trial of Rachel 'Shelly' Shannon, who was convicted of attempted murder for shooting Dr. George Tiller last August.

A magnetic resonance imaging test showed a slight lesion on the left side of his brain. Although somewhat hampered by the affected hand, he continued at his usual pace for several weeks.

Then, while attending a Black Catholic Congress in New Orleans, he experienced the first of several focal seizure episodes. More testing led to brain surgery in July 1992.

Surgeons removed a walnut-sized tumor, which was diagnosed as glioblastoma multiforme, an aggressive cancer of the central nervous system.

Ten days after surgery, Archbishop May began radiation and chemotherapy treatment as an outpatient. But by the end of that year, he resigned his post, saying that governing the archdiocese "has become impossible for me."

Violence

Continued from page 6

gust presidential and congressional vote would be legitimate if the country's electoral law were not reformed.

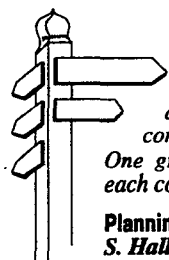
As South Africans prepared to go to the polls, meanwhile, Archbishop Wilfrid Napier of Durban said in Vatican City that despite the dismantling of apartheid, remnants persist in some people's minds.

"That's where you find apartheid more than anywhere else," the South African prelate said in a March 21 interview with Vatican Radio.

He said the phenomenon of "right-wing Afrikaners who want their own homeland" represents a "remnant of apartheid."

South Africa's first open, multiracial elections are scheduled for late April.

Violence in South Africa March 28 was reported to have claimed the lives of up to 16 people in Johannesburg after gunmen shot at Zulu marchers who were protesting the elections. Unconfirmed reports indicated a death toll of 16, with 51 persons reportedly wounded.



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