



THE ARCHDIOCESE OF
GALVESTON-HOUSTON

Remembering Archbishop Emeritus Joseph A. Fiorenza

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(Herald file photo)

Most Reverend Joseph Anthony Fiorenza, Archbishop Emeritus of Galveston-Houston, died in Houston on Sept. 19. He was 91 years old.

Joseph Anthony Fiorenza was born in Beaumont, Texas on Jan. 25, 1931. He was the second of four sons born to Sicilian immigrants, Anthony “Tony” and Grace Galiano Fiorenza. His brothers were Augustine James (AJ), James Edward and Victor Charles (Charlie). He attended St. Anthony High School in Beaumont, where he was elected student body president and football team captain.

After graduating from high school in 1947 at the age of 16, he then entered St. Mary's Seminary in La Porte, Texas. His cousin Sister Benignus Galiano, O.P., said that "He was meant to be a priest. His mother told us when he was a little boy; he pretended to be a priest. From an early age, he knew exactly what he wanted to do."

He was ordained to the priesthood on May 29, 1954, with the last class to graduate from the Seminary's La Porte campus. His first assignment was as assistant pastor at Queen of Peace Church in Houston. In 1957, he became professor of medical ethics of Sacred Heart Dominican College and chaplain of St. Joseph Hospital, both in Houston. He served as administrator of Sacred Heart Co-Cathedral in Houston from 1959 to 1967.

He was later assigned to pastor two Houston parishes, St. Augustine Church (1967-1969) and St. Benedict the Abbot Church (1969-1972). From 1972 to 1973, he was both pastor of Assumption Church in Houston and Vice-Chancellor of the Diocese. He then served as diocesan Chancellor from 1973 to 1979.

Father Fiorenza was given the title of "monsignor" when he was named a Prelate of Honor to His Holiness by then-pope St. Paul VI in December 1973. Then-pope St. John Paul II appointed him the Bishop of the Diocese of San Angelo in west Texas in 1979, where he was ordained to the episcopacy on Oct. 25.

At the retirement of Bishop John Morkovsky in 1984, he was named the seventh bishop of Galveston-Houston. The first native son to serve as bishop of the Diocese, he was installed on Feb. 18, 1985, in Houston. When the Diocese of Galveston-Houston was raised to an Archdiocese in December 2004, he became the first Archbishop of Galveston-Houston. Upon reaching the canonical age of retirement at 75, in February 2006, he submitted his resignation to Pope Benedict XVI. After it was accepted, he then became the Archbishop Emeritus. He kept a busy schedule even in retirement, coming in regularly to his office in the Chancery until his health began to fail in early 2022.

Archbishop Fiorenza's connection to his home diocese, his years of service here as a priest and then as a bishop, formed a deep bond with the priests who minister in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. He was devoted to them and deeply appreciated their work and pastoral care for the faithful. In one letter to his priests, he wrote, "God's grace also comes through the fraternal support we give to one

another. If, as the poet says, ‘No man is an island,’ it is a greater truth to say that priests need priests.”

Archbishop Fiorenza lived a commitment to social justice and care for the most vulnerable in our communities throughout his life. As he once said, “to separate faith from action essentially is not biblical, nor is it Catholic.” In the 1960s, he attended civil rights marches and gatherings in Houston. With two fellow priests of the Diocese, he drove to Alabama in 1965 to join the March on Selma with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. At Houston events, he met and became friends with Rev. William Lawson (now Pastor Emeritus of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church).

With the late Rabbi Emeritus Samuel Karff of Congregation Beth Israel, they formed the “Three Amigos,” working together on interfaith and social justice initiatives. Archbishop Fiorenza and Rev. Lawson established the Coalition for the Homeless in 1987. With Rev. Lawson and Judge John Lindsey, he co-chaired the Homeless Initiative in 1988, which raised almost a million dollars. He and Rev. Lawson were active in the Neighborhood Recovery Community Development Corporation, the Renaissance Corporation, and the Allen Parkway Village Task Force, groups that work to renovate existing houses for low-income and homeless families.

In 1993, Bishop Fiorenza and Rev. Lawson received the first NAACP Unity Awards, recognizing their work on behalf of the homeless and poor. The child of immigrants, he would be a voice for the rights of immigrants and migrants all his life. In 1988, he established a ministry to those affected by AIDS, regardless of their faith background, which included educational programs about HIV/AIDS for parishes and schools. He supported the work of The Metropolitan Organization (TMO) from its founding in 1984 and was a member of the Board of Directors of United Way. As a priest, he directed the diocesan Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the domestic anti-poverty and social justice program of the American bishops, and as a bishop he chaired the national campaign.

At a Juneteenth event with the “Three Amigos” at Interfaith Ministries of Houston in 2020, Archbishop Fiorenza offered the following prayer: “Oh gracious and Holy God, we come together as your children and know that you love each one of us in a very special way, no matter who we are, whatever our race, our ethnic origins, our nationality, or our religion, we are all your precious children, help us Gracious God to know that we are doing your will when we show your love for all people. Help

us in our everyday life to bring love and respect to all your children wherever they are, and in doing so, we know that we are truly doing your will, and we are bringing your love into this world and helping us to live out what you believe most dearly that we are your children, and we deserve love and respect for each other. Amen.”

With an eye to the future and the growth of the Church during his time as head of the Archdiocese, when its Catholic population first reached one million, Archbishop Fiorenza became acutely aware of the need for the burgeoning local Church to expand its spiritual home. He dedicated himself to building the new Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, a sacred space in the heart of downtown Houston where all are welcome to worship. Through his commitment and support of the campaign, the Co-Cathedral opened its doors to the people of God on Apr. 2, 2008.

Educated at Catholic schools, Archbishop Fiorenza championed Catholic education as both a priest and a bishop. In his columns for the Texas Catholic Herald, he wrote regularly to promote Catholic schools. He called them “a critically important part of the educational ministry of the Church,” and wrote that “In choosing a Catholic school, parents choose the best for their children.” In the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, a statue of St. Elizabeth Seton and her relic among those enshrined in the altar are reminders of the Archbishop’s commitment to Catholic education.

While shepherding the Diocese of Galveston-Houston, he also led on a national level through the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. As President from 1998 to 2001, he was the chief spokesman for 300 bishops in the United States. He served on several Conference committees, including the Committees for Black Catholics, Science and Human Values, and Social Development and World Peace. Well-known for his support for missionaries at home and abroad, he chaired the Committee on Missions. He was on the boards of national organizations, including the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and Catholic Relief Services. He also served on the boards of the Catholic University of America and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, both in Washington, D.C., as well as the University of St. Thomas in Houston.

Archbishop Fiorenza’s motto as Bishop was “Thy Kingdom Come.” By using these words from the Lord’s Prayer, he prayed that all may share in the reign of God that comes through Jesus Christ, and in all that he teaches. Speaking to this he

once said “We haven’t completed the walk yet. The journey is still going on, but we’ve made progress in the last 20, 30 years or more, but there is still a lot of social injustice... We can’t stop now; we have to keep going. We have more to do, so that we have true justice for all people in this country, and we live up to the ideals of our constitution.”

Joseph A. Fiorenza was a man of many hats and had different names as well. Many family members referred to him simply as “Uncle Joe,” and during his high school and seminary years his nickname was “Foots.” He was proud of his Sicilian/Italian heritage, and he loved people of all races and ethnic backgrounds. He loved food and was a connoisseur of all things delicious!

He always wanted to treat others to the wonderful dining options available throughout the City of Houston and surrounding areas. He loved all sports, and enjoyed attending, watching, or listening in every chance he could. He loved the cities of Galveston and Houston. We will all remember his grandeur, his presence, his handshake, his larger-than-life appearance, and the tone of his voice. He captivated every room he entered. In truth he was a shepherd of his people and would gently take you by the elbow, hand or arm and guide you along, speaking to you as he leaned in. He had a special devotion to the Virgin Mary and encouraged others to learn about her unique role in our salvation history. He was highly intelligent, an eloquent speaker and a gifted writer with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

We love you, Most Rev. Joseph Anthony Fiorenza, Archbishop Emeritus, Uncle Joe. We thank you and are proud of your fearlessness, your unshakeable courage, your service, your words of advice, for loving all mankind, and for being a man of God. Above all else you were a disciple of Christ. The things you taught and shared with us over the years, the sacrifices you made for our church community and family, are not forgotten. Your legacy will live on in all of us, and we hope to honor you in how we continue to live our lives.

Archbishop Emeritus Fiorenza, was preceded in death by his parents Anthony “Tony” Fiorenza and Grace Galiano Fiorenza, and his brothers Augustine James “AJ” Fiorenza, James Edward Fiorenza, and Victor Charles “Charley” Fiorenza. He is survived by many nieces, nephews, cousins, as well as all the Faithful in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, and all brothers and sisters in Christ. “Well done, good and faithful servant. Come, share your Master’s joy.”

All services took place at the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart 1111 St. Joseph Parkway in Houston, Texas.

For the benefit of those who unable to attend in-person, the livestream video of the following services at the Co-Cathedral can be found at www.archgh.org/live.

On Tuesday, Sept. 27, there was a Solemn Reception of the Body from 7 p.m. until 7:15 p.m. Only this portion of the Tuesday evening services was livestreamed, followed by a visitation from 7:15 p.m. until 9 p.m., with the Fiorenza family present. A recitation of the Holy Rosary was at 8:30 p.m.

On Wednesday, Sept. 28, Archbishop Emeritus Fiorenza Lay In-State from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. with a solemn Vigil for the Deceased Liturgy presided by Auxiliary Bishop Italo Dell'Oro, CRS, at 7 p.m.

On Thursday, Sept. 29, a Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated by Daniel Cardinal DiNardo at 2 p.m., followed by a private Rite of Committal ceremony at Forest Park Lawndale cemetery in Houston's East End.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in Archbishop Fiorenza's memory to the C.R.O.S.S. Academies, formerly the Inner-City Catholic Schools, and to Casa Juan Diego online at www.archgh.org/fiorenzagift.