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Retired Kansas Bishop Fitzsimons dies; headed Salina diocese 1984-2004

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Ogden, Kan.

Retired Bishop George K. Fitzsimons of Salina died Sunday at his home in Ogden. He was 84.

He headed the Salina diocese from 1984 to 2004. In retirement, he lived at the rectory of St. Patrick Parish in Ogden and continued to serve in the diocese until his death.

An evening wake is scheduled for Thursday and a funeral Mass is set to be celebrated the next morning. Both are to take place at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Salina, followed by burial in Mount Calvary Cemetery in Salina.

In an October 2004 news conference to introduce his successor, Fitzsimons thanked the priests and people of the Salina diocese "for the privilege of serving with them for over 20 years." He said the "depth of faith and spirit of collaboration" in the diocese had energized him as a bishop.

His successor was then-Bishop Paul Coakley, who in December 2010 was appointed Oklahoma City's archbishop. The current head of the Salina diocese is Bishop Edward Weisenburger.

Fitzsimons was appointed to Salina after serving nine years as auxiliary bishop of his native diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo.

Over the years as Salina's bishop, he joined his voice with the other Catholic bishops of Kansas on many issues, such as opposing efforts to reinstate the death penalty (1994); calling on lawmakers to pass welfare reform that targeted "poverty, not poor families" (1998); and issuing a white paper on agriculture (2002) that acknowledged the role of growth, science, technology and economics in agriculture but also urged that farm policy respect the family farm and "that way of life" and promote sustainable agriculture.

"There is more to human and agricultural life than economics: There is an ethical dimension to every economic choice," Fitzsimons and the other Kansas bishops said.

In a 1989 column in his diocesan newspaper, the northwestern Kansas *Register*, he urged Catholics to work at forming their conscience based on prayer, study, consultation, understanding of the church's teachings, Scriptures "and common sense."

"Our conscience is a decision to act in particular circumstances in our daily living," he said. "Such decisions are an act of the intellect in which we determine the rightness and wrongness of a daily act and proceed to live our lives."

Before entering the seminary, the future bishop was employed in banking from 1948 to 1950, then served as a lieutenant junior grade in the U.S. Navy from 1950 to 1954, during which time he was a pilot. He was a real estate salesman after his service in the Navy and he entered the seminary in 1956.

He was ordained to the priesthood March 18, 1961, by Cardinal John Cody, then bishop of the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City.

After serving as an associate pastor in three Kansas City, Mo., area parishes, he was appointed chancellor of the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph March 10, 1970. Four years later, he was named to also serve as vicar general of that diocese.

On May 27, 1975, he was appointed an auxiliary bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph and was ordained at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception on July 3, 1975. As auxiliary bishop, he also served as pastor of Christ the King Parish in Kansas City.

Fitzsimons was appointed to head the Salina diocese in March 1984. He was installed May 29, 1984, at Salina's Sacred Heart Cathedral by Archbishop Ignatius Strecker of the archdiocese of Kansas City, Kan.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Fitzsimons was episcopal adviser for the National Catholic Committee on Scouting.

He was born Sept. 4, 1928, in Kansas City, Mo., to George and Margaret Mary (Donovan) Fitzsimons. He attended St. Francis Xavier Grade School and Rockhurst High School and College, all in Kansas City, Mo., and Conception Seminary College, Conception, Mo.

Survivors include his sister, Margaret Muckenthaler of Oak Ridge, Tenn.; a brother-in-law, Allan Molgaard and wife Mary Ellen of Las Vegas; and several nieces and nephews.

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