

Cardinal known for service on interfaith, pro-life, schools issues

BALTIMORE - Cardinal William H. Keeler's retirement as archbishop of Baltimore will be felt not only within the Catholic Church but in Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox and other Christian communities nationwide.

The cardinal, 76, has served 12 three-year terms on the U.S. bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, including a stint as chairman in the early 1980s; served as episcopal liaison for Catholic-Jewish relations for decades; and has been a member of the International Catholic Orthodox Commission for Theological Dialogue since 1986.

Pope Benedict XVI accepted his resignation July 12 and named Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien of the Archdiocese for the Military Services to succeed him. The cardinal will serve as administrator of the archdiocese until Archbishop O'Brien is installed Oct. 1 and will remain a voting member of the College of Cardinals until he turns 80. The Catholic Association of Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers honored Cardinal Keeler with its highest award earlier this year, saying no living bishop had done more for the ecumenical movement.

But the cardinal also found time for a wide range of other concerns. He served as vice president and president of what is now the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in the late 1980s and early 1990s and served two terms as chairman of the bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities, most recently in 2003-06.

In that role, he spoke out on behalf of the bishops against embryonic stem-cell research, partial-birth abortion, human cloning and assisted suicide. With other bishops whose dioceses include parts of Maryland, he urged an end to the death penalty and opposed moves toward same-sex marriage in the state.

He has served as president of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, chairman

of the board of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, co-chairman of the Religious Alliance Against Pornography; member of the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East; and member of the bishops' Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians.

During his 18 years as head of the Baltimore Archdiocese, Cardinal Keeler put special emphasis on Catholic schools and described the support given to Partners in Excellence, a scholarship program that allowed poor, mostly non-Catholic children to attend Catholic schools, as one of the high points of his tenure. The National Catholic Educational Association gave the cardinal its highest honor, the Elizabeth Ann Seton Award, in 1999.

One of the lowest points of his time in Baltimore was the clergy sexual abuse crisis, Cardinal Keeler said at a July 12 news conference with Archbishop O'Brien. During a day of atonement in 2004 he led priests and deacons of the archdiocese in asking forgiveness for sins the church had committed against victims of clerical sex abuse.

Born March 4, 1931, in San Antonio, William Henry Keeler was raised in Lebanon, Pa., where he attended St. Mary School and Lebanon Catholic High School. He earned a bachelor's degree from St. Charles Seminary near Philadelphia in 1952 and a licentiate in theology in 1956 and a doctorate in canon law in 1961, both from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

Ordained a priest of the Diocese of Harrisburg, Pa., on July 17, 1955, in Rome, he served as an assistant pastor at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Marysville, Pa., and secretary of the diocesan marriage tribunal from 1956-58. After returning from studies in Rome he was reappointed an assistant pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel, where he became pastor in 1964.

As secretary to Bishop George L. Leech of Harrisburg, he attended sessions of the Second Vatican Council as a theological adviser. He also served on the staff of the Council Digest, a daily communication service sponsored by the U.S. bishops.

Recalling the council 40 years after it closed in 1965, Cardinal Keeler said he disliked the common media shorthand of classifying council members as liberals or

conservatives. He said he preferred two biblical images for the bishops who attended - “the shepherds, who didn’t want to lose anything from the past, and the fishers, who wanted to go out and lower the nets for the catch.”

In 1965 he was appointed vice chancellor of the Harrisburg Diocese, becoming chancellor in 1969 and later vicar general. He was named an auxiliary bishop of Harrisburg by Pope John Paul II in 1979 and was ordained a bishop on Sept. 21 of that year.

Following the death of Harrisburg Bishop Joseph T. Daley, he was elected administrator of the diocese in 1983 and Pope John Paul named him bishop of Harrisburg that November.

In 1989 he was appointed archbishop of Baltimore by Pope John Paul on April 11 and was formally installed as the 14th archbishop of the nation’s oldest see on May 23.

Named to the College of Cardinals in 1994, he currently serves on the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Congregation for Eastern Churches. Cardinal Keeler had been beset with health problems in recent years, including a total knee replacement in 2005 and a broken ankle resulting from a car accident in Italy in 2006 that killed one of his traveling companions, Father Bernard Quinn of the Harrisburg Diocese.

In June he underwent successful surgery to ease pressure on his brain, believed to be related to head trauma from the accident.