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AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCIS CARDINAL GEORGE

INTRODUCTION

As readers of *Sacred Places* will recall, Partners has worked over the past three years to establish an office in Chicago, providing a range of training and technical assistance to congregations of all faiths in Chicagoland.

As part of the process of networking with Chicago's religious leaders, Bob Jaeger and Tuomi Forrest met with the Reverend John Canary, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Chicago, in the spring of 2008. He quickly expressed an interest in the *New Dollars/New Partners* program and subsequently arranged a meeting with Archbishop of Chicago Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.

Cardinal George was installed as the sixth archbishop of Chicago in May of 1997 to lead Chicago's 2.3 million Catholics; he is the first native of Chicago to do so. Cardinal George also serves as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

After a positive meeting with Cardinal George, his six auxiliary bishops, and the vicar general, the archdiocese sponsored a round of *New Dollars* training for eleven parishes. Through the course of that training, which took place this past year, Chicago Office Director Gianfranco Grande has strengthened the relationship with Cardinal George and with Father Canary, who now serves on the Advisory Board of the Chicago Office. The archdiocese has also recently sponsored a second round of training for another twelve parishes.

Cardinal George does not grant many interviews, and Partners is grateful to have been given this opportunity to speak with him on matters ranging from his and Gianfranco's common love of Rome, to his interest in Chicago architecture, to effective ways to care for the hundreds of older parish buildings in the archdiocese.

CARDINAL GEORGE (cont.)

Cardinal George (CG) and Gianfranco Grande (PFSP) were joined by Colleen Dolan (CD), Director of Communications & Public Relations at the Archdiocese of Chicago.

PFSP: Your Eminence, one thing you and I have in common is... Rome. I know you are the Cardinal Priest of San Bartolomeo all'Isola¹, why in particular did you choose this gorgeous church? Maybe because it is an ideal bridge between the Jewish community of Rome and the Christian side of the city?

CG: Well, it was for many reasons, and all of them related to the bridge. It's the oldest bridge in Rome that connects the mainland to the island and it is a place where the Jewish community has had its Synagogue; but probably the first reason why I choose it is because the bones of St. Adalbert are there - and he is the Saint patron of Poland - and also because it was built at the end of the first millennium and I was receiving it at the end of the second millennium.

PFSP: It is in one of my favorite parts of Rome. My favorite restaurant is there!

CG: Spoken like a true Roman!

PFSP: Indeed...but let's go back to Chicago where you were born and raised.

CG: Yes, I was born on the West side and raised on the North side.

PFSP: St. Paschal was your parish. Tell me about your first memory of the church, not only from a spiritual point of view, but also from an architectural and community focus.

CG: Well, St. Paschal is a very dark church, built in the Spanish style. When I was a young boy, I would go in with my mother, holding her hand. As I got older, the windows started to interest me because of the choice of the scenes - and they are very beautiful. The other feature I liked was the sanctuary. At times the pastor would light it up and nothing else because he wanted the people to look at the sanctuary and those are the two things that impressed me - the windows and the sanctuary. As I got older, I started to appreciate more

the whole architecture of the building. The school formed the community and a lot of us went to the school so it was the center of our social life.

PFSP: As a young man, which activities were you involved with at the church?

CG: I was an altar server! And I remember we had to wear tennis shoes when we served because the pastor didn't want us to scratch the marble floors. The church was a very particular place and everyone knew it, although my neighborhood, unlike some of the neighborhoods, especially on the South side of Chicago, was not overwhelmingly Catholic. It was as much Lutheran as it was Catholic.

PFSP: Being from Chicago you must feel proud of the architecture of this amazing city...

We will do our best to keep every single one of [our parishes] open and to keep them as parishes. If, however, to keep them open we need help because the local parish community can't take care of their church anymore, then it would be helpful if we could find a group of people who could raise the money necessary to repair the churches.... It could be a more ecumenical endeavor....

CG: Oh, yes! Because everything here burned down in 1871, so it's a museum of contemporary and modern art. After all, we invented the skyscraper and the steel frame. If you go down Dearborn Street every building is a prototype; every modern architect has a building here. In Chicago you can see the history of modern architecture. That's why people visit Chicago. You know it was Mies van der Rohe that was part of this renaissance. No buildings were built between the beginning of the Depression and the end of the Second World War. The first major building to be built after the war was the Prudential Building and we all thought that was very tall, but then was dwarfed by the Hancock and the Sears Tower [The Sears Tower is now known as the Willis Tower. *Ed.*]. I think van der Rohe is kind of classical.

People think it's very modern, but it's not! His work is based on Classics...the pillars are there, the rectangular forms. It's not decorative, but the structures are classical. We have now some post-modernism here but it's not as extreme as in other parts of the country - it's contained and cohesive with the inner city and the Loop.

Here the building stock is good! The Germans came after the fire and they were very good builders. The housing stock in the oldest part of the city is very, very good, with lovely design. In some streets like Armitage and Center you could think you were in a German town. You know, when I grew up here, no building was more than one hundred years old; now Chicago is old enough to have its own history of modern architecture, and I think we should be proud of it. We really have a beautiful city, no question about it!

PFSP: The Catholic Church is arguably the owner of more historic properties than any other institution in the world. What is your feeling on how the Catholic Church is taking care of this special patrimony?

CG: I think we are doing our best to preserve older churches here, except when we can't afford it. Here in this country, the government doesn't give us any money to keep up historic churches. Some of those are endangered because they are now too old to continue without repair and they are either without a parish or with a very poor parish.

PFSP: What do you think of the work done by the Commission for the Preservation of the Artistic and Historical Patrimony of the Church?



Archbishop of Chicago Francis Cardinal George and Partners' Chicago Office Director Gianfranco Grande. Photo by Brian Morowczynski; copyright 2009 VIAphotos.com

CG: There is now a greater sense of awareness. Awareness of how the faith was involved in these buildings that were built by people of faith, for people of faith. You know, if we had the money we would keep them all. You mention here the Commission for the Preservation of Existing Patrimony of the Church, they have done very good work in analyzing the situation and cataloging it, in saying, "Here is what we have." But of course they don't have any money to give us!

PFSP: What could be done to inform people better that the Catholic Church cares about preservation?

CG: I suppose you could have a lecture series or bring over a few people from that commission and sponsor a public lecture. That could be a good idea.

PFSP: Some people say the Catholic Church never changes, that it's always the same.

CG: Well, yes... and no. It depends what the things are. Some things we are supposed to do the same. A lot of others we don't. You have to keep changing to adjust. I think in a place like Chicago there is a general sense that, architecturally, this is an important place; church architecture is part of that. So it would be nice to have somebody other than the archdiocese to take the initia-

tive to say what we can do to support the church. And not only the Catholic Church but also other churches too; these that are part of the artistic patrimony of the community. For example the windows of this building [the Archbishop Quigley Center *ed.*] were saved basically by an association of people, most of whom weren't Catholic. The "Friends of the Windows" saw this as an artistic treasure.

PFSP: So you do think that the creation of non-profit organizations to help save the churches could be a solution?

CG: Yes. That's how things are done in this country! You create a non-profit organization that has a specific goal and then you raise money to meet it. I think it would be easier when you have a specific project, like with the windows.

PFSP: So this model would be good also for Catholic Churches?

CG: You have to be careful but it might be helpful! You know, five years ago I would say "Oh, great idea," but I've been burned often enough...but I think it's a good idea in itself. I really don't see why not. And it might be good to make it ecumenical. You have to create a board that would be generally open and could just look at it from its architectural standpoint.

PFSP: Yes, I like this idea.

CG: Yes, I thought you did. It's your idea! (laughs)

PFSP: It's my idea and you like it, too, I guess, because you didn't say you didn't like it!

CG: No, I didn't!

CD: These are the kinds of moments that are nice for the Cardinal to have during the day, because you come with ideas and nice thoughts and not headaches.

CG: There is something else I would like to say and that is that Chicago is a very important place architecturally. Our Catholic parishes, especially those built before the Second World War and even after in the Fifties are very important. We will do our best to keep every single one of them open and to keep them as parishes, not to preserve them as museums. And if, however, to keep them open we need help because the local parish community can't take care of their church anymore, then it would be helpful if we could find a group of people who could raise the money necessary to repair the churches...but you are talking about fairly big sums. If it could be a more ecumenical endeavor, where it isn't just the Church going out saying "give us some money to repair our churches," but rather a group saying we need funds to sustain the architectural patrimony of the city, that would be a good way to go. Provided, of course, that when you start looking at how the funds are distributed there must be some way of seeing that it was done in a fair way.

PFSP: Indeed...and we at Partners, are very excited to be in Chicago.

CG: I've heard good things about your training! The lay people are very enthused. You've helped them see things they wouldn't have seen otherwise. That's important. So thank you very much!

PFSP: Thank you for your time, your Eminence, and...Grazie!

¹ *The Basilica of St. Bartholomew on Tiber Island in Rome is a titular minor basilica, founded at the end of the 10th century.*