

BREAKING NEWS

Thomas O'Brien, Phoenix Bishop who hid priests' abuse, dies at 82

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Retired Phoenix Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien, whose more than two decades as head of the Catholic Diocese of Phoenix ended with his arrest in a fatal hit-and-run accident and an admission of a cover-up involving child abuse by diocesan priests, died Sunday morning, according to a statement from the diocese.

The 82-year-old bishop, who continued living in a church-owned house in Phoenix after his resignation 15 years ago, died at 6:11 a.m. from "ongoing health complications related to Parkinson's disease," the diocese said in a tweet.

"Please pray for the repose of his soul, and may he rest in peace," the diocesan tweet said.

Early life and career

O'Brien was born in Indianapolis in 1935 and entered the seminary there as a teen. He was first ordained as a priest in Tucson in 1961, transferred to the Diocese of Phoenix three years later and worked his way through the church hierarchy as associate pastor and pastor at various churches before becoming vicar general of the diocese, a position that is second in command to the bishop.

O'Brien became bishop in 1982, traveling to Rome to be consecrated by Pope John Paul II.

In the 1980s and '90s, when Phoenix was a smaller place, O'Brien held a position of influence in the community.

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And he did good works. He lobbied on behalf of a paid holiday in Arizona to commemorate Martin Luther King Jr. As a leader within the U.S. church hierarchy, he wanted to urge families not to disown gay and lesbian children. He encouraged interfaith community.

“Bishop Tom’s leadership theme was 'God is Love,’” said Ernest Calderon, an attorney and former member of the Arizona Board of Regents. “He was less concerned about dark-ages dogma than he was with redemption and forgiveness.”

O’Brien hobnobbed with members of the media and politics.

Former Maricopa County Attorney Rick Romley, who would later investigate him in the priest scandals of the early 2000s, described him as “a very officious man who like to exude being a power broker.”

“You recognized that this was an individual that was held quite high in the community,” Romley continued. “He was consulted on political issues. He was a person who transcended the Catholic church.”

A reserved leader

While O'Brien was bishop, the number of Catholics in the Phoenix diocese grew from about 273,000 in 1982 to more than 530,000 by 2003, according to a statement from the diocese Sunday. O'Brien founded 15 parishes, six diocesan Catholic schools and 15 Catholic preschools and was responsible for creating a new Diocesan Pastoral Center in downtown Phoenix.

O'Brien held a high-enough profile to bring Pope John Paul II to Phoenix in 1987, followed by Mother Teresa two years later.

Accounts from the papal visit describe a bishop who was giddily ecstatic at having the Pope in his home.

Personally, O'Brien was shy.

“He was a very private man in a very public position,” said Pat McGroder, who would later become his defense attorney.

Phoenix attorney Michael Manning held him as a good friend.

“This won’t be popular with your readers,” Manning said, “but the truth is, he was a good and gentle man and really loved people. He was very sharp. What fooled people is that he could be pastoral and still ask very good questions.”

But his fall from grace was swift.

Rocked by scandal

In 2002, after media scrutiny of alleged sexual abuse by priests, former County Attorney Romley launched an investigation into allegations of sexual abuse by priests in the Phoenix diocese.

Six priests were indicted; two of them fled the country to avoid prosecution. In 2003, O'Brien was granted immunity from prosecution in exchange for signing an admission that he had covered up sexual abuse by transferring priests and failing to report sex crimes to police.

"I acknowledge that I allowed Roman Catholic priests under my supervision to work with minors after becoming aware of allegations of sexual misconduct," said the settlement agreement. "I further acknowledge that priests who had allegations of sexual misconduct made against them were transferred to ministries without full disclosure to their superiors or to the community in which they were assigned."

The diocese agreed to adhere to strict rules of reporting suspected abuse as part of the county's investigation and its fallout.

Within weeks of the agreement, O'Brien was arrested. While driving home from a church event, he struck and killed a Phoenix man named Jim Reed, who was intoxicated and crossing the street near 19th and Glendale avenues.

O'Brien fled the scene. A witness followed the car and reported the license plate number to police. The car belonged to O'Brien, who never contacted police despite making phone calls about replacing the damaged windshield.

He resigned as bishop shortly after his arrest.

O'Brien was sentenced to four years of probation and 1,000 hours of community service after he was convicted of leaving the scene of a fatal accident.

Manning believes the fatal accident was directly related to the stress of the priest sex scandals.

"His frame of mind in that week was forlorn, desperate, unsure which way he would go," Manning said.

He said he believed that O'Brien was losing focus.

Remorse and prayer

McGroder, who represented O'Brien at trial, described his mood as remorseful, resigned, as if he were putting his life in the hands of God.

"The case took an enormous and emotional toll on the bishop," he said. "I saw him deteriorate before my eyes. But the one thing I never heard from him was a complaint."

After the trial, O'Brien remained in a church-owned house in a leafy green neighborhood of north central Phoenix. He stayed mostly to himself.

Manning recalled visiting O'Brien earlier this year.

"He was, I thought, hollowed-out, frail," Manning said. "He still had a spark of Bishop Tom in his pastoral nature and sense of humor, but he was never the same man."

Despite the scandal, people wished him well.

"As his Director of Hispanic Ministry for eight years, I witnessed his advocacy for the Hispanic community that ensured ministries and services for the Spanish speaking," Phoenix Councilman Michael Nowakowski said in a statement issued Sunday. "His gentle spirit will be missed, May Bishop O'Brien rest in peace."

Kim Sue Lia Perkes served as a spokeswoman for the diocese when O'Brien was bishop. "Bishop O'Brien felt he should always project an image of a strong leader of his flock. Unfortunately, this meant the public never saw the tears he shed for the victims. I did. I saw him crying at his desk, but he never wanted that known," she said Sunday.

"He was a private and mostly gentle soul, but you did not want to witness what he himself called his 'Irish temper.' Most of his acts of kindness were things he didn't want reported, like the fact he regularly made the rounds at St. Joseph's Hospital to visit the sick.

"O'Brien once told me that he thought people had lost sight of forgiveness, which he believed in with every fiber of his being. I replied that, "Bishop, forgiveness doesn't mean you get to keep your job." He seemed genuinely surprised by that."

Romley offered a final assessment.

"Was he a man of God?" Romley asked. "Now that he's passed, it's for God to make that judgment call."

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