
Born in Long Beach, California on June 15, 1936, William Levada was the younger of two children born to Joseph and Lorraine [Nunez] Levada. His great-grandparents had immigrated to Northern California from Portugal and Ireland seventy years earlier, and his parents had moved to Southern California from Martinez just months before his birth. Bill attended St. Anthony High School in Long Beach with George Niederauer, and was accepted for college studies at Saint John Seminary in Camarillo. He completed his major seminary studies at the Pontifical North American College in Rome, and was ordained to the priesthood for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome on December 20, 1961.

After his ordination, Fr. Levada was assigned to St. Monica’s Church in Santa Monica. He returned to Rome after several years to complete a graduate degree in Sacred Theology at the Gregorian University, earning his doctorate there in 1971. During those years, he served as a staff official under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), the Vatican agency charged with protecting and promoting the Church’s teachings on faith and morals. He also taught at the Gregorian University, and served on the faculty of the Pontifical North American College.

In 1982, he was called back to the Archdiocese of Los Angeles by Cardinal Timothy Manning, and took up an assignment as Executive Director of the California Catholic Conference. He also taught at St. John’s Seminary School of Theology in Camarillo, and was the first Director of Continuing Education for the Clergy there. He was named Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles on March 25, 1983 by Pope John Paul II, and his episcopal ordination followed on May 12. After serving for three years in that capacity, he received word from the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio, then-Archbishop Pio Laghi, that he had been named Archbishop of Portland by Pope John Paul II. During his years in Oregon, he focused on vocations to the priesthood, and on improvements to the seminary at Mount Angel, where he taught ecclesiology. While in Portland, he was appointed by then-Cardinal Ratzinger as one of six bishops (and the only American bishop) to an editorial board tasked with preparing the CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. The catechism was published in 1993. (He was also the author of its glossary, published in the second English edition.)

In 1995, Archbishop Levada was appointed Archbishop of San Francisco. In addition to his responsibilities in Marin, San Francisco and San Mateo counties, he served on many committees of the USCCB. In 1997 he participated in the Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops and was later appointed a member of the post-synodal council. In 2000 he was appointed bishop co-president of the Anglican-Catholic Dialogue of the United States of America (ARC-USA). While in San Francisco, he was also a bishop-member of the CDF. In 2002, he was named a member of the US-Vatican Commission that made final revisions to Norms outlining a strict policy on sexual abuse of minors, and providing for the removal from ministry or laicization of priests. In 2003 he organized the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. Several years later, with his
support, the former parish of St. Francis of Assisi was reopened as the National Shrine of St. Francis, including the Porziuncola chapel.

In 2005, newly elected Pope Benedict XVI granted Archbishop Levada a private audience, and shortly thereafter, on May 13, 2005, named the Archbishop as his successor as Prefect of the CDF. The Archbishop was the first American to lead that congregation, and the highest-ranking American ever at the Vatican. Pope Benedict elevated him to Cardinal in the Consistory that took place March 24, 2006. Cardinal Levada served in Rome as Prefect for seven years, with responsibility for overseeing the Vatican’s handling of allegations of sexual abuse of minors, and responsibility for the implementation of reforms for handling serious canonical offenses.

After Pope Benedict promulgated Anglicanorum coetibus in 2009, the CDF was charged with bringing groups of former Anglicans into full communion with the Catholic Church. In 2015, Monsignor Steven Lopes, who had been serving as an official of the CDF, and as an aide to the Cardinal in Rome, was named the first bishop of the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of Saint Peter, the structure (equivalent to a diocese) for priests and laypeople from an Anglican background to retain elements of their Anglican patrimony after entering the Church. Earlier today, Bishop Lopes stated, “The Cardinal’s work as Prefect of the Congregation was a continuation of his life-long passion for the communion of the Church. Having served long years as a diocesan bishop, he never lost sight of the essential pastoral dimension of his own vocation and the mission of the Congregation in service to the People of God.”

Cardinal Levada also served as president of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the International Theological Commission. He retired October 23, 2012 and took up residence for much of the year thereafter within the boundaries of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. The Cardinal interacted regularly with seminarians and faculty members at Saint Patrick’s Seminary & University in Menlo Park, and continued to celebrate Masses, particularly Confirmation liturgies, and undertake other sacramental ministry throughout the Archdiocese and beyond as his schedule and health allowed. But he returned to Rome frequently to participate as a member of several Holy See commissions and committees. In 2013, he participated in the Vatican conclave that elected Pope Francis I. The Cardinal was quoted thereafter stating that he found a “certain tendency...from some of the media to state, ‘Well, now we have a pope who does this, and he’s contradicting what a previous pope did, or he’s turning things into a different story’ and so forth. I think that’s way overdone.” He warned that “this, ultimately, makes the pope less a sign of unity, and (instead) a sign of division, which he is not.” He said he was impressed by the Pope’s, “…reminders to the Church and the world about the poor; people who are easily forgotten or put aside out of our mind and vision.”

In a telegram to Archbishop Cordileone last week, the Pope offered his heartfelt condolences, and recalled with “immense gratitude the late Cardinal’s years of priestly and episcopal ministry among Christ’s flock in Los Angeles, Portland and San Francisco, his singular contributions to catechesis, education and administration, and his distinguished service to the Apostolic See.”

Cardinal Levada was predeceased by his sister, Dolores, in 2007. Please pray for the soul of Cardinal Levada and for the consolation of his family, including his nieces, Julianne Bancroft and Stephanie Herrera, and the extended family.

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