

April 23, 2007 - At 75, a Battle-Tested but Unwavering Cardinal

By MICHAEL POWELL, The New York Times

He has shuttered half-empty churches, faced down disgruntled parishioners and retired an unsightly \$20 million deficit, all in the name of putting the Archdiocese of New York on sturdy fiscal legs.

So the question for Cardinal Edward M. Egan arises: Will this white-haired prince of the Roman Catholic Church follow the lead of other large dioceses and release the archdiocese's financial reports to the public?

Cardinal Egan considers the idea for a second or two, and offers a smile more suggestive of steel than humor. Wall Street titans sit on his finance council and study his ledgers. The cardinal sees no point in public inspection.

"I am transparent to the best possible people," he said in a rare interview in his 20th floor office on First Avenue in Manhattan. "So when you say, 'We don't know,' well, my 'we' knows."

In the dusk of his half-century-long career, Cardinal Egan remains something of a riddle. He turned 75 this month and thus, in accordance with church law, he has submitted his resignation as cardinal to the Vatican. As Pope Benedict XVI weighs the cardinal's future — he can ask him to stay on or to step down — the challenges facing the second-largest archdiocese in the nation extend well beyond uncertain finances.

The core of the New York archdiocese's 2.5 million Catholics is slowly shifting to the northern suburbs, resulting in the closing of some churches in the city and the building of new ones in the suburbs. A majority of the students in the inner-city parochial schools are non-Catholic; 98 percent of the students graduate from high school, but the church subsidizes much of the cost.

And the ranks of priests continue to dwindle, as fewer and fewer young men appear willing to take vows of celibacy. (The archdiocese inducted about half a dozen new priests last year, and the average priest in the United States is older than 60.)

Appointed archbishop seven years ago, Cardinal Egan reasoned that his greatest immediate challenge was to straighten out the financial problems that afflicted the archdiocese. He tended quickly to his listing ship, paring budgets, closing parishes, installing nine finance directors to oversee the archdiocese's 10 counties, and working with wealthy laity to raise the many millions of dollars needed to keep this vast machine of churches, schools and charities running.

But to this day, it is difficult to draw the precise measure of his accomplishments. Before Cardinal Egan arrived, the archdiocese had run an annual \$20 million operating deficit, which it was financing partly by borrowing internally. Church officials declined to give details on the nature of this borrowing, other than to acknowledge that it created a new mountain of debt, totaling more than \$40 million.

Cardinal Egan says — without offering a look at any ledger sheets — that he wiped out the operating deficit within two years. As for the \$40 million worth of internal debt, last week church officials said they were paying it off at a rate of \$3 million per year.

But on Friday, a spokesman for the archdiocese, Joseph Zwilling, said the archdiocese would retire that internal debt by midsummer. He offered few details about this sudden turn.

"Money we had has been put aside and invested and is now sufficient to pay off the debt," Mr. Zwilling said. "We had some surpluses and fund-raising, although I don't have a breakdown."

An accomplished fund-raiser, the Cardinal also declines to talk about his work in that realm, save to describe himself a "a beggar" at the doorstep of wealthy benefactors. And he has refused to release even a bare-boned accounting of the archdiocese's finances, although four of the five largest dioceses in the nation — Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston and Brooklyn — have done so.

He raises a forefinger in caution. He's quite clear about his mistrust of the press.

"Do we want to leave ourselves open?" Cardinal Egan asked, referring to public disclosure of church finances. He rolled his eyes. "Oh, what fun people could have!"

A number of prominent Catholics, however, have embraced openness as a crucial step toward regaining the trust of parishioners disenchanted by financial malfeasance and sexual abuse in dioceses around the country.

The Archdiocese of Boston, which covered up hundreds of cases of sexual abuse by priests and suffered the loss of tens of millions of dollars in lawsuits as a result, now releases voluminous financial statements, listing debts and its five highest-paid contractors.

Kerry A. Robinson, executive director of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, which draws 180 executives from the secular and religious worlds, argues strongly that holding everyone publicly accountable, from parish councils to bishops, makes moral and practical sense.

“Catholics have risen in affluence and influence, and they give a lot more when they know how the money is used, invested and reported,” said Ms. Robinson, who stressed that she had not examined the New York archdiocese. “If a diocese is run in an authentic and transparent way, it becomes worthy of generosity.”

To supporters and critics alike, Cardinal Egan’s resistance to public inspection and to calls for reform follow the pattern of his tradition-bound church career. He is a man of Rome — a Romanist in the argot of church insiders — learned in canon law and philosophy, and a confidant of the late Pope John Paul II. Early in his career he served as a top assistant to Cardinal John Patrick Cody of Chicago, a man with a reputation for brooking little dissent and disliking outside scrutiny.

Last fall Cardinal Egan repelled two small rebellions, one by priests who accused him of being arrogant and of failing to attend to the spiritual needs of the faithful, and another by parishioners who challenged his closing of churches. He replied to his priestly critics by writing an angry letter accusing them of a “vicious attack” intended to smear him. These unhappy few, he argued, were upset only because he had cracked down on child-abusing priests. (He also expressed his displeasure to the 42-member Presbyteral Council, a consultative priests’ “senate,” which then passed a resolution of support for him.)

He also let the police go into an East Harlem church to arrest some protesters.

“He’s brought to the table some amazing organizational strengths, but also some real weaknesses,” said Wallace A. Harris, chairman of the Presbyteral Council and pastor of the Church of St. Charles Borromeo in Harlem. “He wants to hear your opinion, but only if it’s absolutely necessary. You don’t like to say it’s a weakness, but he may not have the ability to listen well.”

Cardinal Egan shakes his head at mention of such complaints. He counsels no worry.

“When I came here, I told everyone what I would do, and quite frankly, I did it,” Cardinal Egan said. “I had to deal with the sex scandal, and I did. I had to realign, and I did. I wanted peace in my diocese, and it’s peaceful.”

His smile is broad. “It’s all been a colossal success,” he said.

But Thomas Hyland, a managing partner at a large law firm and an influential layman in Westchester, worries about the future. “These Cardinals are C.E.O.’s of vast and troubled organizations,” he said. “The financial situation is overwhelming.”

Powerful Pulpit, and Friends

There are few better perches in American Catholicism than the pulpit at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Cardinal Francis Spellman stood there in the 1960s and inveighed against “Godless Communism,” and in the 1980s, Cardinal John J. O’Connor spoke against abortion and for the rights of striking workers.

Cardinal Egan visits many parishes, writes a monthly column in the newspaper Catholic New York and delivers an affecting homily. He even pokes fun at his stentorian voice, which his nieces say calls to mind Darth Vader.

He has spoken out against the war in Iraq, and against abortion. But while other bishops walk picket lines, or threaten to deny communion to politicians who favor abortion rights, he as often stays his tongue or favors a muted tone.

“I’ve done everything I can to stay out of conflict that was not immediately part of the Catholic faith,” the Cardinal says. “I’ve handled it right, quite frankly.”

Cardinal Egan is not without influential friends.

Steven Sweeney, president of New Rochelle College, a Catholic institution, lavishes praise on the cardinal's dedication to education. The Rev. Joseph P. LaMorte, a pastor in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and a member of the Presbyteral Council, notes that the cardinal found the money to build a pleasant retirement home for priests. And Denis P. Kelleher, chairman of Wall Street Access, a money management firm, recalls warm evenings at the cardinal's residence, with wealthy givers in couches and chairs and His Eminence on his beloved grand piano.

"He's a most gracious host, most charming," said Mr. Kelleher.

But the Cardinal keeps a distance from the larger city. Current and retired politicians, business union leaders and other prominent New Yorkers, Catholic and non-Catholic, as often shrug at the mention of his name.

"I've never met him, and our absence of a relationship is intriguing," says Kathryn S. Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York City, a nonprofit group representing the city's leading corporations. She served on public policy committees with Cardinal O'Connor. "I'm sure Egan is a leader inside the church, but not outside."

Born to an upper-middle class family in a Chicago suburb, Cardinal Egan suffered polio as a child; a powerfully built man, he moves with a halting step to this day. As a young priest, he passed less than a year in a parish before departing for Rome for years of training and work as a canon lawyer and judge. He became private secretary to Cardinal Cody in 1965.

A cultural storm was washing over the American Catholic Church.

The F.B.I. told Cardinal Cody that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a communist and sexual deviant, and Cardinal Cody's enthusiasm cooled for Dr. King. He discouraged support of him, even as the cardinal's parish priests stripped off their collars and marched with Dr. King.

An association of Chicago priests voted no confidence in Cardinal Cody. (Faced with his own rebellion last fall, Cardinal Egan angrily invoked his long-ago loyalty to Cardinal Cody as a model).

Young Egan kept an eye on the unruly priests for Cardinal Cody

"Priests were getting arrested and speaking out, and Ed Egan was this button-down Romanist trying to rein things in," said John T. McGreevy, a professor of history at the University of Notre Dame and author of "Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North."

"You could argue he's consistent," Mr. McGreevy said. "Egan wasn't interested in changing the world in 1968, and he's not interested in that in 2007."

Cardinal Egan later served a term as auxiliary bishop under Cardinal John J. O'Connor. Theirs was a far frostier relationship. The gregarious Cardinal O'Connor wrote a letter to his priests noting that Bishop Egan was not his choice as auxiliary.

In 1988, Auxiliary Bishop Egan became bishop of Bridgeport. There he shored up Catholic schools and installed financial controls. He also declined to divulge cases of abuse by clergy members, and allowed priests who underwent counseling to continue working long after allegations surfaced.

In videotaped testimony in 1997, he argued that the diocese held no legal sway over priests. "Every priest is self-employed," Bishop Egan said. "He pays his taxes four times a year."

Five years later, Cardinal Egan offered a conditional apology: "If in hindsight we discover that mistakes may have been made as regards prompt removal of priests and assistance to victims, I am deeply sorry." The Bridgeport diocese has so far legally forestalled the release of its records.

Battling a Deficit

Cardinal Egan arrived in New York in 2000, where he faced the task of cleaning the fiscal stables. The late Cardinal O'Connor was no financial manager; he had run a \$20 million annual operating deficit and declined to close near-vacant

parishes. As former Mayor Edward I. Koch said of his late friend: “Cardinal O’Connor was a great man, but he was like the Pentagon. He was incapable of saving money.”

Cardinal Egan laid out a painstaking course for closing parishes. Each parish prepared reports. Diocesan officials visited, studying maps and demographics, and agreed to close fewer parishes than first planned.

But when the archdiocese released the final list of 21 parish closings and a furor arose, Cardinal Egan viewed discussion as closed. (He opened his press conference by talking of finances restored and parishes saved, saying: “I’m delighted to be able to share with you a lot of good news.”) When parishioners loudly protested at Our Lady of Vilnius, a Lithuanian national parish in Manhattan, the cardinal invited the administrator to his office. He had the church doors padlocked while they talked.

“We sent people to attend Mass there: Not a word of Lithuanian,” Cardinal Egan said, explaining why he closed the church. “The pastor speaks not a word, can’t read it, can’t write it. They average around six people at the early Mass.”

He slapped the arm of his chair. “Is there any person in the world who has sanity who would keep open deserted churches?” he said. “I made a good move.”

Perhaps, though, even some traditional support for New York’s cardinals has drained away of late. At a Friendly Sons of St. Patrick dinner in Rye, N.Y., last month, Catholic donors gave a loud ovation to a priest who had publicly challenged Cardinal Egan.

The cardinal’s problem, said Terrence W. Tilley, a professor of theology at Fordham University, is that he understands management but misses the subtle chemistry that binds a parish.

“This realignment symbolized his technocratic management style,” Mr. Tilley says. “People have buried parents, baptized babies and celebrated weddings in these places. The best parishes are sacred places, and a leader acknowledges that heartbreak.”

Such talk exasperates Cardinal Egan. To reduce his career to a knack for numbers strikes him as demeaning; he is not, he insists, some priestly accountant who dryly recites numbers and awaits his flock’s approval.

“I don’t expect a secular newspaper to capture this, but this question of whether I can eliminate debts: That’s not why I’m here,” he said. “That’s not who I am.” He shifts his eyes towards the ceiling. “I often wonder: What must John Paul think of this? He didn’t send me here for ‘fiscal reasons.’ ”

Now he leans forward, his eyes searching.

“I could have done something else in my life,” he said. “But I decided to do this. I wanted to preach a God-given means of salvation. So much of what we’ve been talking about, these anonymous letters and complaints and questions about ‘transparency’? It’s peripheral. All of this passes.”