

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

**C**ardinal Edward Egan has some critics in New York City, where, as archbishop, he has decided to close a number of parishes and schools for economic reasons. Now, at age 75, he has reached retirement age, though it is not clear when he will be replaced as archbishop of "the city that never sleeps," or by whom. At the end of November, and only a few hours before he left for Rome to attend the November 24 consistory, Cardinal Egan received *Inside the Vatican's* culture editor Lucy Gordan at his residence behind St. Patrick's Cathedral.

**Your Eminence, you were still a schoolboy when you felt called to Holy Orders. What inspired you?**

CARDINAL EDWARD EGAN: I was blessed by growing up in a wonderful parish, St. Giles in Oak Park, Illinois. My parents owned a home there for 46 years. We four children were blessed with extraordinary priests. My pastor, Monsignor Lawrence Frawley, was a real hero, but that's a long story which I'd like to tell you when we have more time.

One of his curates, Reverend Charles Burnickel, took care of me and my brother during the years we had polio, a very contagious disease then. The bravery of this young priest and his extraordinary kindness to my family made a great impression upon me.

Later, my high school in downtown Chicago was Quigley Preparatory Seminary, though 85 to 90 percent of the students didn't become priests. In short, I had a special family, a supportive parish, and an outstanding education. All of these elements created, I think, an assistance to the Lord's grace, and I hope it was the Lord's grace that led me to the priesthood.

**So were Fathers Frawley and Burnickel your mentors?**

EGAN: No. I was ordained in Rome in 1957 when Samuel Cardinal Stritch was the archbishop of Chicago. When I came home in 1958 after four years at the seminary — the Pontifical North American College — Cardinal Stritch had died and I became secretary to Albert Cardinal Meyer, Stritch's succes-

sor. I was with Meyer for two years and I would have to say that he would be one of my mentors.

Then I returned to Rome for five years on the staff of the Pontifical North American College. The rector was Archbishop Martin J. O'Connor, who had a great deal to do with my development. He was the man who had ordained me in 1957 and then two years later he brought me back to be on his faculty. Then, when I went home again, Cardinal Meyer had died and John Cardinal Cody, the archbishop of New Orleans, was named to Chicago. I had the pleasure of working as secretary and later co-chancellor under Cardinal Cody from 1965-1972. So, if you are looking for people who made a deep impression

on me as a young priest, I would have to include Cardinal Meyer, Archbishop O'Connor, and Cardinal Cody.

**Who was responsible for sending you to study in Rome?**

EGAN: Cardinal Stritch. Perhaps you know Villa Stritch in Rome on Via della Nocetta. It's where the priests who work in the Curia live. Cardinal Stritch was a gentleman. During my student years in Rome, he wrote me a letter each semester. I kept those letters for many years.

**What did you learn from Cardinal Stritch?**

EGAN: First and foremost the importance of kindness. He was a man of extraordinary kindness.

**From Archbishop Martin O'Connor?**

EGAN: I watched a man who worked miracles in Rome. After World War II he came to Rome. He got the Villa Santa Caterina at Castel

Gandolfo back for us Americans. He also revamped the American College or graduate house on Via dell'Umiltà and was responsible for building the Pontifical North American College, our seminary, on the Janiculum.

O'Connor later became the nuncio to Malta and the first president of the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications. He led the committee which wrote the document on communications for the Second Vatican Council. So I would certainly say that it was an extraordinary opportunity and grace for me to be associated with such a splendid person.

**What did your parents think of your decision to**



## EDWARD CARDINAL EGAN

**A TALK WITH THE ARCHBISHOP OF NEW YORK. THE CARDINAL TELLS US ABOUT HIS LIFE AND WORK — AND THE POPE'S UPCOMING VISIT TO THE USA...**



become a priest?

EGAN: Being devout Catholics, they were very proud.

**Had there been other priests in your family before you?**

EGAN: No.

**Since?**

EGAN: No, there haven't.

**Have you ever doubted your vocation?**

EGAN: Again the answer is no.

**You are Irish-American and you are the cardinal of New York, which until recently at least was a very Irish archdiocese...**

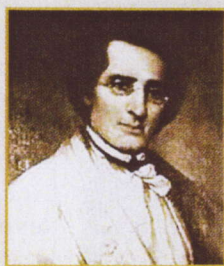
EGAN: Now wait a minute, the largest number of priests, if you are interested in their ethnic backgrounds, in New York is perhaps of Italian descent with an ever-growing number of Hispanic background.

**Cardinal Spellman was the cardinal when I was growing up in New York. He and all his successors have been Irish-Americans. Is St. Patrick, Ireland's and New York's patron, your favorite saint?**

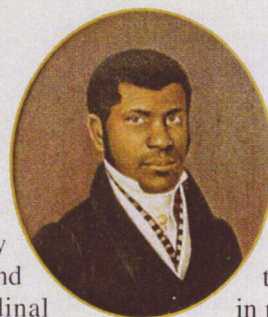
EGAN: I'm very fond of St. Patrick and especially of our beautiful cathedral here in New York, but I have a lot of other saints who mean a lot to me. Moreover, there are many "New Yorkers" that members of the archdiocese and I hope to see beatified someday: Terence Cardinal Cooke, who was the cardinal archbishop of New York before John Cardinal O'Connor (not to be confused with my mentor Archbishop Martin J. O'Connor) and whose cause has been presented to the Holy See. There's also the priest Félix Varela (1788-1853), a Cuban who was chosen to represent Cuba in the Spanish Parliament where he insisted that the Spanish government give independence to Latin America and put an end to slavery, so Spain put a price on his head. He fled Spain and came to New York, founded the first Spanish-language newspapers in the US, and built three of our NY parishes. I believe he was a man of extraordinary intellectual achievement and holiness. I would also include Pierre Toussaint (1766-1853), a slave from Haiti who came to New York in 1787. When his owners, you'll have to forgive me for that word, fell upon hard times, he took care of them because he'd become the most sought-after hairdresser in New York, even serving on bank boards. He was a daily communicant and founded many Catholic charities. Another candidate would be Dorothy Day. By mentioning these people I want to emphasize that there are many New Yorkers of extraordinary sanctity that we want to see raised to the altars.

**So who is your favorite saint?**

EGAN: Mother Cabrini, who actually got her start here in



Terence Cardinal Cooke with Mother Teresa; left, Félix Varela; below, Pierre Toussaint; right, Dorothy Day



New York. So did John Neumann, who was ordained in New York by Bishop Dubois, but is connected to Philadelphia. Not to leave out Mother Seton, who is connected to Baltimore, but was baptized here in New York. So I hope in your article you'll mention all these New York heroes.

**As we touched on earlier, during the 1950s you studied in Rome: first at the North American College and then at the Gregorian University, not to mention that you were also ordained in the Eternal City on December 15, 1957. What was Rome like 50 years ago?**

EGAN: I landed in Rome in 1954. Of course, we all came by ship in those days. I came on the *USS Constitution* which belonged to the American Export Lines. Rome was still suffering from the tragedy of the Second World War. There was tremendous poverty everywhere. But over my many years in Rome, I saw the Italian nation rebuild itself. I think that you and I would both agree that, from an economic standpoint, Italy is in very fine condition today. Italy is an inspiration and a blessing for me.

**Would it be fair to say that Rome is still your favorite city?**

EGAN: It's certainly one of them. As you know, I'll be leaving for Rome tonight. I'm going over for the consistory, but also to make sure that everything is in place for the papal visit to New York next April.

**During your long stays in Rome between 1972 and 1985 as a judge of the Sacred Roman Rota, you became one of the Holy See's greatest experts in canon law. Canon law has many branches; which one interests you the most?**

EGAN: Marriage law. I was a professor of marriage law at the Pontifical Gregorian University. I taught the procedures for handling marriage cases at the *Studium Rotale*, which is the law school attached to the *Rota*, and at a number of other universities in Italy. My lectures usually focused on canon law having to do with marriage or canon law having to do with marriage procedures. You mentioned having interviewed Cardinal Peter Erdö, another canon law expert. He and I are very good friends. He's been here to visit me in New York many times.

**You were a close collaborator of His Holiness John Paul II. Do you have any special memory of him you'd care to share with *Inside the Vatican's* readers?**

EGAN: Every memory I have of him is warm and beautiful. To give just one example: when I became bishop in Bridgeport, Connecticut, I asked if he would be so kind as to appear in a film that we were putting together for the diocese. He was wonderful and invited me into his library, where we made the film. I felt as if I'd been chatting with a very old friend.



**How do you think that history will judge John Paul II?**

EGAN: I don't know how history will judge him, but I hope he'll be remembered as a very holy and energetic successor of St. Peter.

**Am I right that during those same years you must have also collaborated with His Holiness Benedict XVI?**

EGAN: Yes, of course, although I don't know the present Holy Father as well as I knew Pope John Paul II. I've had the pleasure of being in meetings with him over the years and I know him to be a very wise and brilliant Churchman like Pope John Paul II, as well as a man of great dedication to the work of the Church and a man of extraordinary holiness. We are very blessed to have had them both.

**You share a deep love of classical music with Benedict XVI. I believe His Holiness's favorite composers are Mozart and Beethoven; who are yours?**

EGAN: I'm told that his favorites are Haydn and Mozart. Instead, my tastes, I have to confess, go to a little later: the piano music of Chopin, Debussy and Ravel. I studied Haydn and Mozart and the piano from my very early years. I'm sure that much of the piano music that the Holy Father likes to play I also learned to play years ago.

**I've read that Pope John Paul II sent you back to the United States as a reward for having worked so hard on the revisions of the 1983 Code of Canon Law?**

EGAN: Frankly, I've never heard that. That's a new one, but I've been away from Rome for a while, so I don't hear all the stories floating around there. What I do know, however, is that on my return to the States I was auxiliary bishop for almost four years to John Cardinal O'Connor and my assignment was to be in charge of education here in the archdiocese of New York. Then from there I went next door to Bridgeport until I came back here in 2000. It's all been a wonderful experience.

**You once said: "When I was ordained, I made a promise to myself... I would ask for nothing and I'd refuse nothing..." Still, your return to the United States as auxiliary bishop of New York in the spring of 1985, not only caused perplexity in the Curia, but also a letter of justification by New York's John Cardinal O'Connor, your predecessor, addressed to all his archdiocese's 2,500 priests, stating that he had not chosen you. What were your feelings about John Paul's decision to change his mind and send you to New York and not to Boston, which he'd already told you would be your destination?**



Above Mother Cabrini.  
Below, Cardinal John  
Newman; right, Mother  
Seton



EGAN: These are all stories that I have to catch up with. As I've told you, I'm leaving for Rome tonight and it sounds to me as if there are a lot of stories out on the streets that I need to catch up on. You know Rome is wonderful in this way. Some of the stories about me are very imaginative and very creative and I enjoy them. There's a saying in Rome, as you probably know, "*Se non è vero, è ben trovato*," which means, "If it's not true, it would be a good story anyway."

**After two years in New York as auxiliary bishop and another two years as bishop of Bridgeport, Connecticut, after the death of O'Connor, you returned here as archbishop and were elevated to cardinal a year later in spite of O'Connor's deathbed attempts to block your nomination. To a layman like myself, it seems to me that as cardinal you have a style similar to a benevolent Japanese CEO: from the cradle to the grave. You care most deeply about promoting vocations and about caring for retired priests. Do you agree with that portrait?**



EGAN: The following would be my self-portrait and we'll see if this gets on the streets of Rome. I think that my duty here is first of all to bear witness to the faith, to repeat Revelation accurately. Second of all, my duty is to lead the people in prayer. We have a wonderful tradition here in the archdiocese of New York of very devotional liturgy. I was very lucky to become the archbishop of an archdiocese with such a tradition. And finally, I believe my job is to see to it that we are a people committed and active in justice and compassion.

**As you know, I interviewed Christoph Cardinal Schoenborn of Vienna, Austria, who told me that only 15 percent of the Viennese attend Mass regularly. What about New York?**

EGAN: Somewhere between 30 and 35 percent.

**What has been your greatest challenge as cardinal of New York, perhaps dealing with pedophile priests or maybe the so-called "Concerned Clergy Controversy"?**

EGAN: As you probably know, I've had no problems with pedophilia during my years here in New York. I'm also lucky to have wonderful, very united clergy. I believe that I have the finest clergy that I've ever known. For example, last night I went to one of the 19 celebrations of our vicariate's 200th birthday — I think over 1,000 people attended. We were founded in April 1808.

A little while ago I had a dinner for all my priests and deacons. If you'd had your camera there and seen the priests, their unity, their devotion, and their support one for the other, I think you would have concluded with me that I have extraordinary clergy, as loyal as you can find anywhere in the world.

**Do you consider your involvement in education your biggest accomplishment?**

EGAN: Yes, although I'm not good at deciding what my



accomplishments are. Certainly running our educational system is one of my most important efforts, one aspect of my work that I devote an immense amount of time and energy to. I suspect that some people would say that I devote too much of my time begging for money and seeing to it that our schools are operating well.

In the New York archdiocese we have the largest private school system in America, whether it be religious or not. It's a constant struggle, especially to keep our inner-city schools open. Wouldn't I love to see in your splendid magazine the fact that we have 115 inner-city schools in the three boroughs we serve; 23 are secondary or high schools; 65% plus of our children in those schools live under the poverty line. We know that because of the school lunch program. Nonetheless, 95% of our youngsters graduate in four years and 98% of them go on to college in a city where the public school system is able to graduate less than half of the children who come to it for an education.

Believe it or not, our 115 inner-city schools are less than half of the 279 parochial elementary and secondary schools I run in the archdiocese. We also own, but do not run, eight Catholic colleges and universities as well as a Catholic medical school, the New York Medical College. It's one of the largest in the nation. So, you see, the archdiocese and I are very much involved in education. I doubt any other archdiocese in the world is so involved in education.

Many of our 279 schools are not in the city of New York or in our other inner cities. The archdiocese of New York is 180 miles long and we have schools throughout the entire area that we serve. They're all excellent schools, but especially now that the middle class is being so pressured by ever-rising prices and salaries that are not keeping up, it's very difficult for these families to spend the kind of money that's necessary for a Catholic education. I wish we had more priests, sisters, and brothers who could staff our schools, but the situation is what it is. We struggle to do our very best, first of all because we're teaching the faith along with academic lessons and also because ours is a tremendous work of charity in those areas that are depressed.

We are one of the largest charitable institutions in the United States. Our archdiocese's Catholic charities have an annual budget of over half a billion dollars. We have thousands and thousands of catechists who are teaching every week in over 400 parishes. So these are the issues that for me are central here in New York. We're a people who preach the Gospel devotedly; we're a people who pray well especially at Mass; we're a people committed to justice and compassion, and I would point to our inner-city schools and Catholic charities as two examples.

**I've read that you've had to cut back on the number of schools because the budget you inherited was way over-extended. Do you consider your drastic reduction of the budget, because of which you've been nicknamed "Edward Scissorhands," a necessary evil?**

EGAN: The newspapers like to give me epithets and to mention that this school or that school had to be closed. However, they always forget to mention that the enrollment goes up nevertheless. Many times here in New York, if two schools were within a block or two of each other, by closing one or the other and consolidating, we increased enrollment because the education improved in the remaining school. So we've seen a rise in the total enrollment and very few necessary closures. Some of the local newspapers like to emphasize only what they hope makes the situation look bad. Once again I'd like to emphasize that ours is the largest private school system in the nation, whether religious or not religious.

**I'm very honored that you agreed to speak with me this**

**morning because I've been told that meeting with the media is your least favorite part of your job; is that true?**

EGAN: You know there again that belief stems from one article that appeared in a small newspaper about a year and a half ago. Here's the real story behind it. The newspaper wanted to interview me and I couldn't make it so they published an article saying I avoided the press. Pure nonsense! I appear frequently on television. Yesterday I was on New York One. I'm also on the radio all the time. I think my press secretary

Joseph Zwilling here and I do a pretty good job. For example, the day that Archbishop Sandi announced that the Holy Father would be coming to New York, I believe I was on three television shows, two radio shows, and spoke to numerous newspapers.

**What's your favorite aspect of your job?**

EGAN: Parish visitation. When I came here, I had known Cardinal O'Connor very well. After all, I'd been his auxiliary bishop; the good cardinal liked to be at St. Patrick's Cathedral every Sunday. Even if he was in Rome on a Saturday morning, he'd fly back to be at St. Patrick's on Sunday. He considered that pulpit to be the focus of his work and it was a splendid focus. I have rather focused on the individual parishes. I try to be in St. Patrick's two Sundays a month, but frequently I don't make it because I do parish visitations and parish anniversaries. My greatest pleasure as the cardinal archbishop of New York, and all my priests know this, is to be in our parishes. We have over 400 parishes; I want to know each and every one of them well.

**A Chicagoean by birth and a Roman cleric by training, do you feel yourself "an outsider" here in New York?**

EGAN: I've lived in Greater New York since 1985, so I think

Cardinal Egan receives the red biretta from John Paul II on February 21, 2001





after 22 years I'm no longer an outsider. Wouldn't you say that's safe?

**The year 2007 was an important year in your life. You turned 75, and you will celebrate your 50th anniversary as a priest next month, and it has just been announced that His Holiness will visit here in April 2008, the bicentennial of the archdiocese and the 150th birthday of St. Patrick's. In your opinion what's the significance of this papal visit to Washington, D.C. and to New York?**

EGAN: The Holy Father is coming here because he's addressing the United Nations. He was invited here by Ban Ki-moon, the new secretary general of the United Nations. Ki-moon's a good friend of mine and has been in this room many times with his wife. Ki-moon went to Rome and in person invited the Holy Father to New York, and he accepted.

So, since he was coming to New York, he, of course, as a head of state, had to stop first in Washington. He's actually doing more than just a stop there.

In Washington he'll be meeting the president, but he'll also be meeting with all the bishops of the United States; he'll be speaking to the educators of Catholic University, and he'll be having a meeting with the non-Christian leaders of the United States. So that's the Washington story.

In New York, he'll address the UN in the morning and later that day address the ecumenical leaders of the Protestant and Orthodox Churches here in New York City. The next day he'll hold a youth rally at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers and preside at a Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral for our deacons and priests. This will be the first Mass ever celebrated in St. Patrick's by a Pope. On his third and last day he'll visit Ground Zero and hold a Mass at Yankee Stadium.

**Speaking of His Holiness, what was it like to enter the conclave? As someone who is so familiar with Rome and the Curia and so close to John Paul II, what were your emotions?**

EGAN: It was one of the most moving events of my life — certainly, as a priest, the most moving event apart from my ordination and my consecration, both of which also took place in Rome. As I've said, I was ordained by Archbishop Michael O'Connor and consecrated by Cardinal Bernard Gantin from Benin. Let me mention that as a member of the *Rota* I was involved in the conclaves which elected John Paul I and John Paul II. As you may recall, they say "*Exeant Omnes*" ("May everybody leave") just before the cardinals enter the Sistine Chapel and the last of the "everybodies" are the judges of the *Rota*. So you could say I was well-prepared emotionally. Even so, the last conclave was very stirring.

**In keeping with the Code of Canon Law, you offered**

**His Holiness your resignation as archbishop of New York on your 75th birthday. The Holy Father has not yet accepted it, so, like your predecessor, you could continue to vote in conclaves until your 80th birthday and even afterwards you could continue to participate in pre-voting discussions but not enter the conclave.**

EGAN: Wait a minute. Be careful. I don't know about conclaves with or without an *s*. I'll continue as archbishop and cardinal of New York as long as the Holy Father wants me to and, of course, I would also hope that, when I get to my 80th birthday, Benedict XVI will still be Pope.

**Before his election His Holiness expressed his desire to retire back to Bavaria to study and write. What about you?**

EGAN: First of all, when they retire me, I will be very happy to do what anyone tells me to do, but that anyone will be the Holy Father. When he says to retire, I'll step down. I love being the archbishop of New York, but I'll be delighted to do whatever is next.

I once heard a story in Rome — and this is another of those crazy Roman stories — that I was going to retire to Paris. I hope a French Roman made it up and that people everywhere chuckle about it.

All jokes aside, I expect to continue living here in New York after my retirement, to have a chance to do Confirmations, and to help the new archbishop in whatever way he might want. I'll always remain a New Yorker. However, if someone wants to trace the source of the Paris story, I'd love to know who was responsible.

**Last but not least, how would you like to be remembered as archbishop of New York?**

EGAN: As one who took good care of the people of God, at least to the very best of his ability. Not to mention, as the cardinal who spent most of his time, all that he could, in the parishes of his archdiocese.

Before we end, I want to add that I was delighted to meet you and speak to *Inside the Vatican*.

I believe I've had a subscription as long as the memory of man, so I know your magazine very well and I think you do a very fine job.

I'm glad I've been able to tell you about our great archdiocese of New York, of which I'm very proud, to straighten out some of the stories about me that are fun but nonsensical, and to tell you about the Holy Father's upcoming visit here.

Please mention that here in New York we're all looking forward to next April. Please assure the Holy Father that he'll be welcome in New York. We'll be warm and prayerful. ●

*Lucy Gordan is culture and arts editor of Inside the Vatican.*

