



## **Nationally Renowned Attorney, who Represented the Archdiocese of Chicago for 50 Years, Dies at 78**

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**Chicago (April 26, 2021)** – James A. Serritella, J.D., an attorney who served as principal outside counsel and legal advisor to the Archdiocese of Chicago for nearly 50 years, died at Northwestern Memorial Hospital Friday, April 23, at the age of 78 from complications of heart disease.

Serritella was a named partner at the law firm of Burke, Warren, MacKay & Serritella where he served as chair of the Religious and Not-For-Profit Group. His nearly half century legal practice focused on the legal needs of tax exempt religious and not-for-profit organizations. He advised four Catholic cardinals, beginning with Cardinal John Cody in the 1970s and continuing through the administrations of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Cardinal Francis George and, currently, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich.

Over his extensive career, Serritella saw the Archdiocese of Chicago through countless critical events including the clergy sex abuse crisis and the many transitions and restructurings of the archdiocese, including the deaths of three cardinals.

Serritella said, “The Church acts best when it acts as a Church.” He believed the Church should address the problem of clerical sexual abuse by having its own pastorally sensitive personnel reach out to those injured and try to help them. Guided by this belief, Serritella was one of the chief architects of the Archdiocese of Chicago’s approach to the clerical sex abuse of minors. In 1991, Cardinal Bernardin appointed a special commission to study the matter and make recommendations for corrective action. The work of Serritella and others, coupled with the Commission report, inspired the development of revolutionary policies in 1992. They established an Independent Review Board to assess abuse allegations and an Office of Victim Assistance. This groundbreaking approach was pastorally oriented and directed toward protecting children while treating survivors compassionately.

Serritella was the lead counsel for Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in *Cook v. Bernardin*, an accusation of sexual abuse against one of the foremost Catholic figures that shook the Catholic Church. His accuser recanted and Cardinal Bernardin was exonerated of charges of sexual misconduct.

Serritella was also a fierce advocate for full disclosure and transparency for the Archdiocese of Chicago, a nearly unique practice among U.S. dioceses. Notably, in 2006 the archdiocese published a list of all clergy with substantiated allegations of child sexual abuse against them and in 2014 the archdiocese voluntarily released nearly 20,000 pages of documents related to these priests.

Serritella also had an enormous impact on a countless range of public policy and constitutional issues in the United States Supreme Court, Illinois Supreme Court, and other courts throughout the United States. These cases involved issues such as treatment of the seriously ill, education finance, taxation of exempt and not-for-profit organizations and religious liberty.



In the mid-1970s, Serritella helped the Catholic Conference of Illinois development legislation (the “Rock/Grotberg amendment”) requiring the Department of Children and Family Services to pay the full cost of services purchased from the private sector, this enabling Catholic Charities and other private religious and secular organizations to continue programs such as foster care for decades. Serritella also represented the prevailing party in the constitutional and public policy landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *NLRB v. Catholic Bishop of Chicago* which held that the schools operated by a church to teach both religious and secular subjects are not within the jurisdiction granted by the National Labor Relations Act, preserving protections for religious organizations and serving as a precedent that stands and has vitality to this day. Other significant cases included the Illinois Appellate Court cases of *Grace Lutheran Church v. Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, *Galich v. the Catholic Bishop* and *Catholic Bishop v. the Village of Justice*, and the Circuit Court of Cook County case, *Catholic Charities vs. Leahy*.

Serritella’s career was also distinguished in his work related to religious freedom both within the United States and internationally. In the early 1990s, after the fall of the iron curtain, Serritella made several visits to Eastern Europe to participate in legal and constitutional consultations on religious freedom and not-for-profit law in the newly emerging democracies, notably in Hungary and Russia. Serritella wrote and lectured extensively on religious freedom and on legal issues affecting exempt organizations. He was a founder of the DePaul University College of Law Center for Church/State studies and served as chair of its Advisory Board. He was also a founder of the Center for Migration Studies in New York and an associate editor of the *International Migration Digest* (now called the *International Migration Review*). Further, he has been involved in several hundred mediations over the course of his career, chiefly as a party representative, but occasionally as a mediator or advisor.

Serritella was also a tireless civic volunteer, with notable contributions to Catholic Charities, including founding the Catholic Charities Gala of the Arts with his late wife Ruby in 2002. He was also deeply involved in the Italian American community in Chicago and founded the “Forum Associates” which aimed to provide professional advancement and philanthropy to the Chicago Italian community. He was also a member of numerous professional and civic organizations including the Chicago, Illinois State, and American Bar Associations, the Canon Law Society of America and the Diocesan Attorneys Association. He was also a Charter Fellow of the Illinois Bar Foundation and Fellow of the American Bar Foundation.

Serritella was the recipient of numerous awards throughout his career. In 2012, Francis Cardinal George presented a papal degree from the Vatican that appointed Serritella to knighthood in the Pontifical Equestrian Order of St. Gregory the Great, one of the five orders of knighthood from the Holy See, in recognition for Serritella’s long and exceptional service to the Holy See and Church. Serritella was also invited to the White House by former President Jimmy Carter when Pope John Paul II visited the United States in 1979. He was also awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws Degree from North Park University, the John Courtney Murray Award from the DePaul University College of Law, the *Rerum Novarum* Award from St. Joseph Seminary, the *Caritas Christi Urget Nos* award from Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the *Pax et Bonum* Award from the Franciscan Friars and the Outstanding Leaders Award from the Carmelite Order. In addition, Serritella received the Extraordinary Knight Award, presented by Rev. Ryan Council, Knights of Columbus, the Bishop Quarter Award, presented by the Archdiocese of Chicago, and the Catholic Lawyer of the Year Award, presented by the Catholic



Lawyers Guild of Chicago. He was also the author of "Religious Organizations in the United States, A Study of Identity, Liberty, and the Law" published in 2006.

Serritella was raised in the Taylor Street neighborhood, Chicago's west side Italian American community. He was the son of Anthony Serritella, a civil servant at the Chicago Board of Education, and Angela Serritella (nee DeLeonardis). His family originates in Ricigliano, a small central Italian mountain town. Serritella studied to be a priest for 10 years with the Missionary Fathers of Saint Charles (known as the Scalabrinians). He left the seminary before ordination to pursue a career in public life and service. He studied economics and law to transition to the secular world. Serritella received a master's from the Committee for the Analysis of Ideas and Study of Methods at the University of Chicago and his J.D. from the University of Chicago Law School in 1971. He held a B.A. from St. Charles Seminary College of Liberal Arts and a second bachelor's degree from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

Serritella was married to his wife Ruby (nee Amoroso) from 1981 until her death in 2009. They had one son, Anthony V. Serritella, M.D., 36. He invested significant time chronicling the history of his family, including compiling extensive family histories for his and his wife's families, self-publishing several large editions on the subject. Numerous genealogy projects were ongoing at the time of his death.

He is survived by his son Anthony, a physician at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, his sister, Camille Vena, a retired Chicago Public School teacher, and countless cousins, nieces, nephews, family members and friends.

The family invites all who wish to celebrate and remember Serritella's life to a public wake at Holy Name Cathedral, 735 N. State St. in Chicago, on Thursday, May 6, beginning at 4 p.m. (advanced registration required due to COVID-19 protocols), followed by a private remembrance service that evening. The funeral will also be held at Holy Name Cathedral on Friday, May 7, celebrated by Cardinal Cupich. Details for the remembrance service, funeral, and nearby complimentary parking are forthcoming.

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