

Life of peace shortened by violent crash

By JOHN NORBERG
Staff Writer

WEDNESDAY, JAN. 25
Tipton, Indiana

Monsignor William Higi had been absent from the room for long moments.

But his absence was little noted by the assembled clergy of the Lafayette Roman Catholic Diocese, gathered at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse for the first of two days of meetings.

The bishop was due to arrive from Lafayette soon to lead an important session.

Shortly after 4:15 p.m. Higi quietly reentered the room. He stood aside and heard little of what Father Tom Doran, chancellor from Rockford, Ill., had to say.

Five minutes passed. Doran finished. Higi moved forward.

He asked the priests to remain seated. He called Doran aside and spoke to him privately, briefly.

When he went to the podium at the front of the room, Higi struggled to deliver his message.

"It appears," he said — and the words ached in his throat — "that the bishop has been killed ..."

St. Mary, Indiana

Father Steve Modde, a campus minister, was in a jubilant mood.

He was with a group of 25 people celebrating a successful Religious Awareness Day at St. Mary of the Woods College outside Terre Haute.

Bishop George Fulcher of the Lafayette Diocese had been there earlier in the day and had given an excellent talk. It was titled "The Peace Pastoral and The Catholic College Today."

There had been loud applause, even cheering and yelling, when Barbara Doherty, the new president at St. Mary, announced that the bishop would deliver the main talk at her inauguration in March.

A look back in pictures

Local, Page B5

At 9:30 p.m. Modde was called from the party to the telephone. The caller was a reporter from a Terre Haute newspaper.

As Modde listened, the blood fell from his face. He returned to his friends. They looked at him and knew something was terribly wrong.

And then he told them.

At 1:28 p.m. on Jan. 25 — after leaving the meetings at St. Mary of the Woods on what had become a bright and sunny 30-degree afternoon — Bishop George A. Fulcher, in his blue four-door Chevrolet, drove off the northbound lane of U.S. 41, eight miles north of Rockville.

The car landed upside down. It burst into flames.

A man of peace came to a violent end. Fulcher, who would have celebrated his

62nd birthday five days after the accident, had been bishop of the Lafayette diocese for just nine months.

But in that short time he had captivated the Catholic and non-Catholic community with openness, intelligence and leadership.

● He was active in the ecumenical movement. Two days before he died, he had a breakfast for 10 Protestant leaders at his Lingle Avenue home. And he planned more.

● He was one of five U.S. bishops who authored the widely quoted and debated bishops' pastoral letter urging nuclear disarmament. And he was chairman of a national committee of three bishops charged with disseminating the pastoral stand throughout the nation and the world.

● In November, he knocked at the door of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., and refused to be turned away while attempting to deliver thousands of letters from Lafayette area people. The letters urged the

See BISHOP, Page A3



Bishop George Fulcher
1922-1984

Bishop

Continued from Page A1

release of three people from the Soviet Union. After repeatedly being told to leave, a persistent Fulcher finally was allowed inside to deliver his message.

As word of his death spread, praise for the bishop came from as far away as the Vatican.

He was an extraordinary man, said Higi, second to the bishop in the church here.

"I do believe his understanding of people and the clergy was just remarkable," Higi said last week.

HE WAS CAREFUL, according to those who knew him well. He was a cautious driver.

What happened to him that bright Wednesday afternoon in Parke County might never be known.

It will be 30 to 60 days or more before the autopsy report is filed. Even then, it might provide no clues.

Fulcher might have fallen asleep behind the wheel. His car might have malfunctioned. He might have had a heart attack or a stroke.

- He had heart double bypass surgery two years ago.
- He had high blood pressure.
- He was a borderline diabetic.

But while the tragic occurrence that led to his death might forever be left to speculation, we can know that on the last day of his life he was vibrant and energetic and doing what he had come to enjoy most — discussing the pastoral letter.

"He was jovial," said Father Modde of St. Mary, one of the last people to see him alive.

He usually was, according to those who knew him best.

IN THE NINE MONTHS since Fulcher moved here from Columbus, Ohio, Higi — who shared the bishop's home — had grown to know him well.

"He was very much of a night person," Higi said last week.

"We would talk before supper and during supper. He was a tremendous conversationalist," Higi said. "And it wasn't just small talk. It was extremely interesting conversation."

"He had a wide interest in literature and also in the arts," Higi said. "He was quite well versed in the arts."

After supper the bishop regularly turned on the evening news and sat down in a chair. And just as regularly, he fell asleep before the TV set.

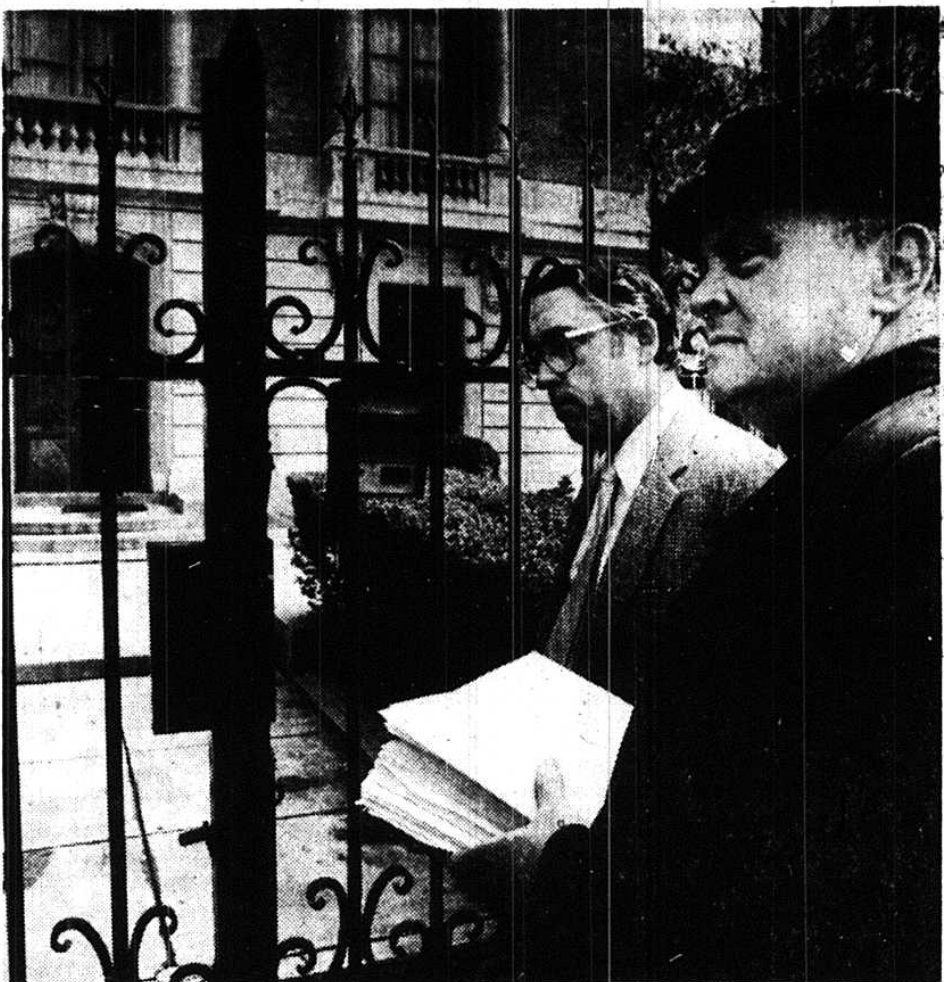
"I left him alone after supper because he would frequently doze off," Higi said. "He would get his 20 winks. Then about 8 o'clock he would get his second wind and wake up refreshed and ready to go. He would read several newspapers and cut out clips and work until midnight when he went to his room."

Higi last saw Fulcher Tuesday evening, Jan. 24. They passed in a hall — Higi going to one meeting, Fulcher to another.

They exchanged goodbyes.

At 7:30 p.m. that Tuesday, Fulcher spoke to a group of religious educators at Blessed Sacrament Church, in West Lafayette. He discussed bringing the bishops' pastoral letter on peace into the church school curriculum.

By 10:30 p.m. he was home. It was still early, by his schedule.



Determined for peace

Bishop George Fulcher stood before the gate of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., last Nov. 16. He refused to leave until he turned over letters from Greater

Lafayette urging the release of three refusniks from the Soviet Union. With him was Rabbi Samuel Fishman of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations in Washington.

very enthusiastically. "I think what endeared people toward him and toward his message was his personalism," Modde said. "He was aware that diversity is in the church today and that people would interpret the pastoral letter differently. He knew everyone didn't have to be the same."

After the question-and-answer session, the bishop went to LeFer Hall, a student living unit. There he took part in a prayer service.

A few students from the Lafayette diocese greeted him afterward. He spoke with them briefly.

IF HE FELT ILL, he didn't complain. If he was tired, he didn't mention it.

"He was acting very normal," Modde said. "He shook hands right before he left, and he said he had originally planned on spending the entire day here. But he had to get back because of the workshop on canon law."

That workshop was scheduled for Tipton, where the clergy of his diocese had already gathered and awaited his arrival.

Fulcher walked to his car in the parking lot at 12:45 p.m. His plan was to drive to Lafayette, stop briefly at his home, and then travel to Tipton.

His apparent planned route home was to take him up U.S. 41 to Attica, then on to Indiana 28 and Indiana 25 into Lafayette.

Some people more familiar with the drive might have avoided the winding U.S. 41 through Parke County and taken Indiana 63 instead. It looks longer on the map. But some call it faster and safer.

But Fulcher was new to the area. Shortly after he left, realizing he had a

flames. But they did not see the car drive off the road.

PARKE COUNTY DEPUTY John Britton was on the scene within minutes.

"I'd say probably the man went to sleep," Britton said last week. "Probably no one will ever know. But I think that's what happened. He wasn't speeding. He never made any attempt to apply his brakes. It all would have happened pretty quick."

"If he had hit something, maybe he would have woken up," Britton said. "But the first thing he hit was the road sign. And by then it was too late."

"Here's what I imagine happened," Britton said. "It had been a cloudy day. Then the sun came out. He had his heater on and the combination of the sun and the heater made it hot in the car and you get sleepy when that happens."

High blood pressure also can cause drowsiness.

It took more than 1½ hours to remove the bishop's body from the burned, wrecked car. If fire hadn't started, Britton said he believed Fulcher could have been freed within 10 minutes.

Parke County Coroner Dr. Michael Berger issued a preliminary statement blaming death on smoke inhalation. Immediately after the accident, he reportedly discounted the possibility that Fulcher might have suffered a heart attack.

But a spokesman in his office last week said nothing has been ruled out.

LAST WEDNESDAY AFTER.

Bishop

Continued from Page A1

release of three people from the Soviet Union. After repeatedly being told to leave, a persistent Fulcher finally was allowed inside to deliver his message.

As word of his death spread, praise for the bishop came from as far away as the Vatican.

He was an extraordinary man, said Higi, second to the bishop in the church here.

"I do believe his understanding of people and the clergy was just remarkable," Higi said last week.

HE WAS CAREFUL, according to those who knew him well. He was a cautious driver.

What happened to him that bright Wednesday afternoon in Parke County might never be known.

It will be 30 to 60 days or more before the autopsy report is filed. Even then, it might provide no clues.

Fulcher might have fallen asleep behind the wheel. His car might have malfunctioned. He might have had a heart attack or a stroke.

- He had heart double bypass surgery two years ago.
- He had high blood pressure.
- He was a borderline diabetic.

But while the tragic occurrence that led to his death might forever be left to speculation, we can know that on the last day of his life he was vibrant and energetic and doing what he had come to enjoy most — discussing the pastoral letter.

"He was jovial," said Father Modde of St. Mary, one of the last people to see him alive.

He usually was, according to those who knew him best.

IN THE NINE MONTHS since Fulcher moved here from Columbus, Ohio, Higi — who shared the bishop's home — had grown to know him well.

"He was very much of a night person," Higi said last week.

"We would talk before supper and during supper. He was a tremendous conversationalist," Higi said. "And it wasn't just small talk. It was extremely interesting conversation."

"He had a wide interest in literature and also in the arts," Higi said. "He was quite well versed in the arts."

After supper the bishop regularly turned on the evening news and sat down in a chair. And just as regularly, he fell asleep before the TV set.

"I left him alone after supper because he would frequently doze off," Higi said. "He would get his 20 winks. Then about 8 o'clock he would get his second wind and wake up refreshed and ready to go. He would read several newspapers and cut out clips and work until midnight when he went to his room."

Higi last saw Fulcher Tuesday evening, Jan. 24. They passed in a hall — Higi going to one meeting, Fulcher to another.

They exchanged goodbyes. At 7:30 p.m. that Tuesday, Fulcher spoke to a group of religious educators at Blessed Sacrament Church, in West Lafayette. He discussed bringing the bishops' pastoral letter on peace into the church school curriculum.

By 10:30 p.m. he was home. It was still early, by his schedule.

HE WAS ACCUSTOMED to getting up at 7:30 a.m. But he probably got up earlier on Wednesday, Jan. 25, to drive to St. Mary of The Woods College. He left for the college near Terre Haute shortly after 8 a.m. He made the trip alone.

Going alone was his own choice. As head of a diocese that included 86,000 Catholics from 64 parishes in 26 counties, he could have asked someone to drive him.

"Some bishops always have someone with them. He wasn't that way," Higi said. "If we were going to a meeting together in the diocese, I would drive. Or if he was going to have a service, he would take someone along to assist in the service and that person would drive."

"But normally, the bishop drove by himself," Higi said. "It was his time to get away from the phone calls and the pressure and be alone. And I understand that."

"But I've had to think about this a great deal," he said. "If I had been in his car that day, maybe this wouldn't have happened."

FULCHER'S TRIP TO St. Mary of The Woods had been planned for three months.

He arrived at the college at 10:15 a.m., in time for brunch in the Mother Mary Cleophas Dining Room.

Half an hour later, in the same room, he delivered his talk on the peace pastoral letter and the Catholic college to assembled faculty and staff.

"He spoke for probably 45 minutes," said Father Modde. "Then he entertained questions for about 15 minutes. It was an excellent session — just super. He was received



Determined for peace

Bishop George Fulcher stood before the gate of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., last Nov. 16. He refused to leave until he turned over letters from Greater

Lafayette urging the release of three refusniks from the Soviet Union. With him was Rabbi Samuel Fishman of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations in Washington.

very enthusiastically. "I think what endeared people toward him and toward his message was his personalism," Modde said. "He was aware that diversity is in the church today and that people would interpret the pastoral letter differently. He knew everyone didn't have to be the same."

After the question-and-answer session, the bishop went to LeFer Hall, a student living unit. There he took part in a prayer service. A few students from the Lafayette diocese greeted him afterward. He spoke with them briefly.

IF HE FELT ILL, he didn't complain. If he was tired, he didn't mention it. "He was acting very normal," Modde said. "He shook hands right before he left, and he said he had originally planned on spending the entire day here. But he had to get back because of the workshop on canon law."

That workshop was scheduled for Tipton, where the clergy of his diocese had already gathered and awaited his arrival.

Fulcher walked to his car in the parking lot at 12:45 p.m. His plan was to drive to Lafayette, stop briefly at his home, and then travel to Tipton.

His apparent planned route home was to take him up U.S. 41 to Attica, then on to Indiana 28 and Indiana 25 into Lafayette.

Some people more familiar with the drive might have avoided the winding U.S. 41 through Parke County and taken Indiana 63 instead. It looks longer on the map. But some call it faster and safer.

But Fulcher was new to the area. Shortly after he left, realizing he had a long afternoon of driving ahead, he probably stopped and filled the tank of his car with gas.

HE THEN DROVE NORTH, possibly lost in his thoughts and plans for the diocese.

Fulcher had worked on the national level in a circle of bishops, some of whom have been named or will soon be named cardinals.

But it is unlikely he ever would have left Lafayette for higher office.

"Archbishops, not bishops, are named cardinals," Higi said. "And given his age, he probably never would have been transferred to an archdiocese. We thought he would be our bishop until retirement, which would have been about 15 additional years."

That plan ended eight miles north of Rockville, just south of Indiana 47.

The bishop, wearing a seat belt and driving the speed limit or slightly slower, was on a straight section of dry, two-lane highway. Ahead was a downgrade and a left-hand curve followed by two more curves.

Before he reached the first curve, the right half of his car drove off the right side of the pavement. The car traveled that way for 396 feet. Fulcher made no attempt to brake — or if he did, the brakes failed.

The car crashed through a yellow warning sign. The road turned but Fulcher's car went straight. It became airborne and flew 30 feet over a ravine. It hit an embankment, flipped, flew 30 more feet and landed upside down.

The tank full of leaking gas burst into flames.

Two people in vehicles traveling well behind Fulcher stopped when they saw the

flames. But they did not see the car drive off the road.

PARKE COUNTY DEPUTY John Britton was on the scene within minutes.

"I'd say probably the man went to sleep," Britton said last week. "Probably no one will ever know. But I think that's what happened. He wasn't speeding. He never made any attempt to apply his brakes. It all would have happened pretty quick."

"If he had hit something, maybe he would have woken up," Britton said. "But the first thing he hit was the road sign. And by then it was too late."

"Here's what I imagine happened," Britton said. "It had been a cloudy day. Then the sun came out. He had his heater on and the combination of the sun and the heater made it hot in the car and you get sleepy when that happens."

High blood pressure also can cause drowsiness.

It took more than 1½ hours to remove the bishop's body from the burned, wrecked car. If fire hadn't started, Britton said he believed Fulcher could have been freed within 10 minutes.

Parke County Coroner Dr. Michael Berger issued a preliminary statement blaming death on smoke inhalation. Immediately after the accident, he reportedly discounted the possibility that Fulcher might have suffered a heart attack.

But a spokesman in his office last week said nothing has been ruled out.

LAST WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON — almost a week to the hour after the accident — Fulcher was buried in St. Mary Cemetery in Lafayette.

At St. Mary of The Woods College, there's been a certain depression these past days, Father Modde said.

There has been elsewhere, too, as those close to the bishop wonder how this could have happened, how it could have been avoided.

But in a spiritual sense, Higi said, maybe it's not for us to wonder.

"In some respects this reminds you of what happened with Pope John Paul I," he said. "Pope John Paul I broke onto the world scene and captured our imaginations. He seemed so fresh and full of hope — a man of great vision."

"Then he died after 30 days and it just seemed impossible," Higi said. "It didn't make sense. But somehow, out of the plan of God, we got John Paul II."

"How will anyone fill the shoes of Bishop Fulcher?" he said. "We'll just have to trust that somehow it will happen. A person of faith just has to trust that there's a reason and a purpose known only to God."

"As people of faith," he said, "our efforts now need to be directed toward thanking God for the gift he gave us in Bishop Fulcher. And we must trust that his vision and enthusiasm can be kept alive in whomever the next bishop happens to be."

Fulcher himself was quite proud that he was one of the few people to have an audience with Pope John Paul I.

"The people loved him," Fulcher said of the first John Paul. "But we never know what God has in mind for us, do we?" Fulcher said that two days before he died.