

# The most powerful women in Chicago Business

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Betsy Bohlen

Chief operating officer, Archdiocese of Chicago

Betsy Bohlen, 49, became chief operating officer at the Archdiocese of Chicago in 2015, reporting to Cardinal Blase Cupich. A native of Gary, she worked 16 years at management consulting firm McKinsey before leaving to join the archdiocese, which serves about 2.2 million Catholics and 336 parishes in Cook and Lake counties. She is heavily involved in Renew My Church, the archdiocese's restructuring initiative in response to a priest shortage. (Interview condensed and edited.)

**CRAIN'S:** How did you discern that you had a vocation to do this work? Did you struggle with the decision to leave McKinsey?

**BOHLEN:** I struggled less than you might imagine because it happened gradually. I had served the archdiocese on a pro bono basis for many years. I had this sense of calling to help the archdiocese, which I thought at the time meant using my volunteer time. Then I took a sabbatical from McKinsey to help the archdiocese for a year, so I think it was an easier transition because I was already here working.

What is the hardest part of the job?

Because in the work we're doing now people come from very many different backgrounds and experiences, misunderstandings can result. So people might think that the businessperson is going to come corporatize the church, when the businessperson really is trying to use those skills in the service of the mission of the church. You have to spend much more time on buy-in building than you might otherwise. It takes longer, but I actually love that challenge.

The archdiocese is evaluating which parishes to close and consolidate. Are you the last person who signs off before it goes to the cardinal?

I'm part of a group of people that would be the last to sign off before it would go to the cardinal. We have been very careful to try and make this as consultative as possible. So we obviously ask the parishes for their own views of things, about what they think the right options are. There's a group called the executive committee here that evaluates it, but then there's a decision commission made up of laypeople and religious throughout the archdiocese who are also reviewing the recommendation before it goes to the archdiocese. I know that gets a lot of news, the structural configurations, and I think we would describe Renew My Church first and foremost as spiritual renewal. There's a lot of work that we're beginning around how to think about what a parish—and parish vitality—looks like in the future.

What are the limits of power?

Whatever we try to implement, there has to be understanding of it. It has to make sense to people, and there has to be buy-in for it. There has to be some sense that people have input to the process. Trying to actually have impact without people coming along—that absolutely would limit any sense of power.

Do you have a favorite saint?

Catherine of Siena is one. She actually led reform in the church.

She was tough. She lobbied the pope.

She absolutely did. A very close priest friend had suggested, early in my tenure, thinking about her and having a special devotion. So that helps frame how I think about my role. Just in terms of some aspiration.

—Claire Bushey