

Maurice Ferré: a Miami mayor who took risks, saw the city's potential and its flaws

[BY DOUGLAS HANKS](#)

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Maurice Ferré, the former Miami mayor who died Sept. 19, was celebrated at two memorial services on Thursday. BY [JOSÉ A. IGLESIAS](#)

[Maurice Antonio Ferré](#) was remembered Thursday as a pioneering and charismatic mayor who took political risks and pushed Miami to live up to its potential as a cosmopolitan city while facing its failings when it came to racial discrimination and inclusion.

“They called him mad when he thought that fisherman’s wharf ... could be turned into a magnificent park that now bears his name,” George F. Knox Jr., the Miami city attorney during Ferré’s time as mayor in the 1970s and 80s, told more than 800 people gathered at the Cathedral of Saint Mary for the funeral.

“They called him mad when Maurice went to the Department of Justice of the United States of America and asked them to file a civil-rights lawsuit against his own city.”

The eulogy recalled Ferré at the height of his power and prestige, the first Hispanic mayor of Miami who brought with him a progressive agenda and a belief that the city that could emerge as the gateway where Latin America meets the United States. Ferré died on Sept. 19.

A member of a wealthy family from Puerto Rico, Ferré presided during some of Miami’s most troubled times, including the 1980 race riots sparked by the acquittal of four white county police officers in the beating death of black insurance salesman Arthur McDuffie during an arrest.

Miami still abides by federally mandated hiring and promotion practices for police and firefighters put in place after Ferré asked the Justice Department to intervene.

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Mercedes Ferré during the memorial ceremony for her husband, former six-term Miami mayor Maurice Ferré, at Miami City Hall, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. Jose A. Iglesias JIGLESIAS@MIAMIHERALD.COM

An active Democrat who aspired to higher office but failed at bids for the U.S. Senate and county mayor, Ferré was remembered as a politician who didn't put a priority on avoiding defeat. And while he was praised as erudite and charming, Ferré's eulogizers also described him as scrappy, blunt and confident.

"He didn't suffer fools in my estimation, or take a whole bunch of prisoners," said David Lawrence, the civic activist and former Miami Herald publisher. "But, then, most of those people got what they deserved."

Two members of the Ferré family spoke. Son Maurice R. Ferré, a doctor who has founded a string of successful companies in the medical field, began his eulogy with a title for his father's farewell: "Heart of a champion. Final chapter."

Sonia Succar Ferré Rodriguez, a granddaughter and program manager at the Nature Conservancy, recalled Ferré's recent renunciation of some of his pro-growth stances from decades ago, declaring [in a March essay](#) that he regretted not "having paid more attention to the need for a greener Miami."

“He was blunt about his own flaws,” Rodriguez said. “Hoping current leaders would learn from his mistakes.”

Eduardo Padrón, the recently retired president of Miami Dade College, described Ferré as a political leader who saw long-term promise when short-term problems looked daunting.

“For Maurice, there was always a light at the end of the tunnel,” Padrón said during the morning service. “Maurice was crafting a plan for the new Miami.”

The day began with a final moment at City Hall for Ferré, a great-grandfather who died of cancer at age 84. A city honor guard escorted Ferré’s casket into the well of the commission chambers for the first memorial service of its kind in Miami’s history.

“He was the closest thing to royalty this city has known,” Miami Mayor Francis Suarez told the City Hall crowd. Suarez, the only person to deliver a speech at City Hall, centered his eulogy around the letters of Ferré’s first name. “’M’ for ‘mayoral.’ I never witnessed a moment when he was not mayoral. ... ’E’ for ‘elegance.’ He lived with grace, and he ultimately died with grace.”

Dozens of people, some waiting outside City Hall shortly after sunrise, passed the Ferré family for a personal moment before the closed casket draped in white roses.

“He was a great supporter of farm-worker issues,” Maria Garza, an advocate for laborers in the Homestead area, said after the service. “He was always a phone call away. And that phone call would bring many other phone calls from people who wouldn’t pick up for me.”



Friends, relatives and colleagues of Maurice Ferré, the former mayor of Miami, gathered at Miami City Hall Thursday for a memorial service. Ferré died Sept. 19. Pedro Portal PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM

The memorial included words from Ferré himself, in the form of a video interview recorded months ago with the former mayor whose last elected office was a county commissioner in the late 1990s.

“I think I was a good public servant. I was good in government. I’ve never been very good at politics,” a smiling Ferré said in the video, wearing a blazer with a pastel handkerchief, his hair gone from treatment.

Fernand Amandi, the Democratic pollster and Ferré friend who recorded the interview, said the former mayor got the most emotional when discussing his wife, Mercedes, and the rest of his family, which includes five living children (a son, Francisco Ferré, died in a 1995 plane crash), 12 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

In the video, Amandi asked off camera how Ferré would want a great-great-grandchild to describe him in a class report. “He loved his family,” Ferré said. “He loved his wife. And he was a good father.”

The final question asked Ferré how he hoped his city would remember him.

“As a person that loved Miami,” Ferré replied. “And that took public service seriously. And tried my best.”



Mercedes Ferré during the memorial ceremony for her husband, ex six term Miami Mayor, Maurice Ferre, at Miami City Hall, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. JOSE A. IGLESIAS JIGLESIAS@MIAMIHERALD.COM



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A funeral motorcade with the family of former Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferre, arrived at City of Miami city hall to a memorial ceremony to honor his memory and legacy, as Ferre became known as the “father of modern Miami” who shaped the city into the culturally diverse and vibrant community it is today. in Miami, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. PEDRO PORTAL PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM



City of Miami Mayor Francis Suarez speaks to family and friends of former Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferre, including his wife Mercedes Ferre and sons and daughters, during a memorial ceremony to honor his memory and legacy at city hall, as Ferre became known as the “father of modern Miami” who shaped the city into the culturally diverse and vibrant community it is today. in Miami, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. PEDRO PORTAL PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM



City of Miami Police officers guarded the casket of former Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferre, during a memorial ceremony to honor his memory and legacy at city hall as Ferre became known as the “father of modern Miami” who shaped the city into the culturally diverse and vibrant community it is today. in Miami, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. PEDRO PORTAL *PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM*



Past and present elected officials joined the family of former Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferre, during a funeral mass presided by Reverend Tomas G. Wenski, Archbishop of Miami, at The Cathedral of Saint Mary in Miami, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. PEDRO PORTAL PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM



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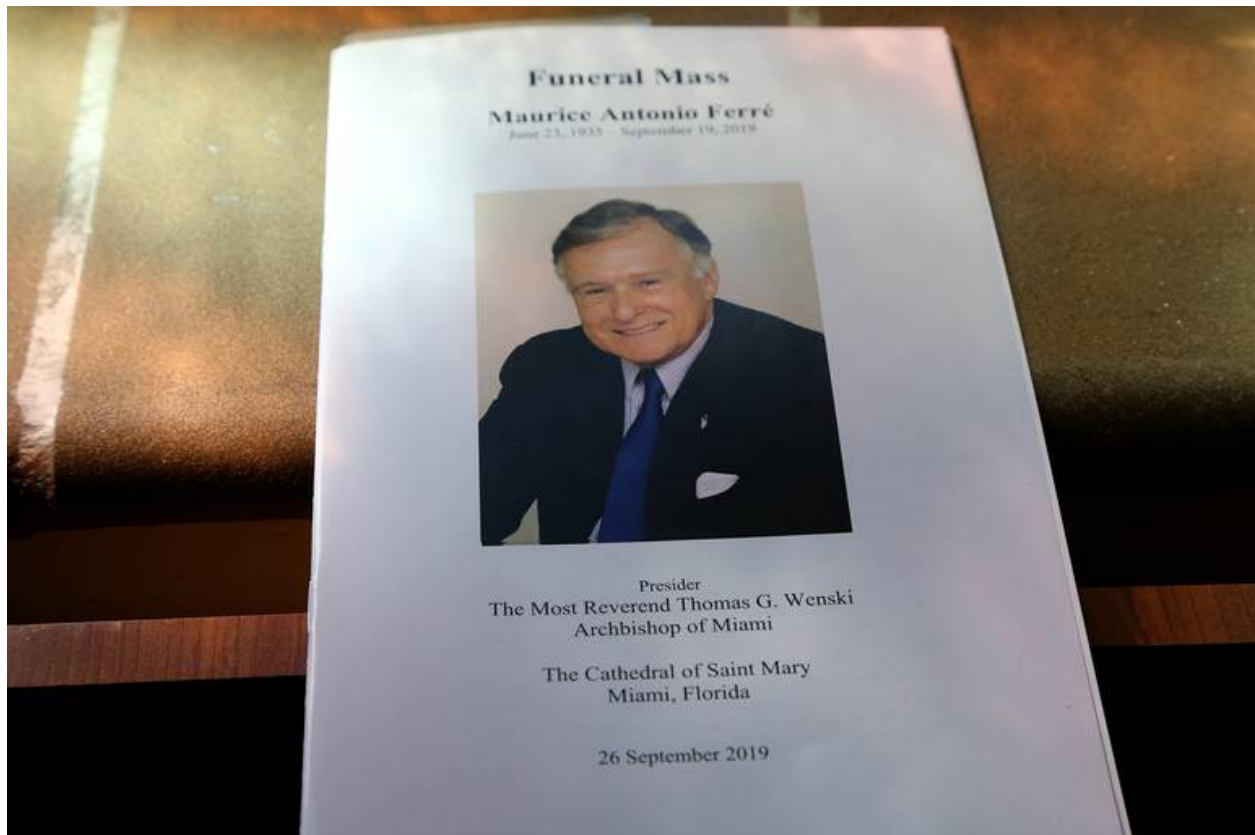
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Postcard/program of the funeral mass for former Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferre, presided by Reverend Tomas G. Wenski, Archbishop of Miami, at The Cathedral of Saint Mary in Miami, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. PEDRO PORTAL PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM



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City of Miami, Miami-Dade County and Florida State Troopers Police officers get ready to lead the motorcade of former Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferre, to the cemetery after a funeral mass at The Cathedral of Saint Mary in Miami, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. PEDRO PORTAL PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM



Family, friends and the community in general attended a funeral mass for former Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferre, at The Cathedral of Saint Mary in Miami, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. PEDRO PORTAL PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM



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City of Miami Fire Fighters Department pay tribute to former Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferre, during a funeral mass, outside of The Cathedral of Saint Mary in Miami, on Thursday, September 26, 2019. PEDRO PORTAL PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM