

Archbishop Borders celebrates 40 years as a bishop

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Looking back to the day a delegate for Pope Paul VI asked him to become the founding bishop of Orlando, Fla., 40 years ago, Archbishop William D. Borders admitted he was somewhat shocked.

Then working as pastor of St. Joseph Cathedral in Baton Rouge, La., Archbishop Borders had devoted much of his priesthood to university campus work. A teacher and scholar who also was the pastor of two parishes, the Indiana native didn't have the traditional background of many bishops of that era.

"At that time, I'd never worked in a diocesan headquarters in my life," remembered Archbishop Borders, who had been ordained for the Archdiocese of New Orleans in 1940.

The middle-age monsignor didn't give the pope an answer right away. He wanted some time to think and pray. After a few days consulting his confessor, he knew what God wanted. He said yes.

A mere six years after taking up his post in Florida, the archbishop said yes again when the pope appointed him the 13th archbishop of Baltimore in 1974 - taking him from the nation's newest diocese to the oldest.

Archbishop Borders' willingness to become a spiritual shepherd in the American church would have profound implications for his priesthood and the Catholic community at large. His life was forever changed by a high-profile role that placed incredible personal demands on him.

The church was also changed as the pioneering archbishop helped institute the reforms of the Second Vatican Council after the groundwork had been laid by giants

like Cardinal Lawrence Shehan.

In an interview with The Catholic Review a few days before he celebrated the 40th anniversary of his June 14 episcopal ordination, Archbishop Borders reflected on his years as a bishop and his vision of the church – one marked by a sense of collegiality, social justice and reaching out to the alienated and downtrodden.

The 94-year-old archbishop called it “fantastic” to be able to observe his anniversary and he thanked God for his vocation. He was especially grateful to the many priests, religious and laypeople who helped him along the way.

Champion of collegiality

Throughout his 15 years as head of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Archbishop Borders was a champion of collegiality. He wanted to involve more people in leadership and he took practical steps to make it happen.

Having served as an advisor at the Second Vatican Council, the archbishop was deeply committed to the two great documents from the council, “Lumen Gentium” (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) and “Gaudium et Spes” (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World).

“There were amazing and wonderful discussions and debates at the council,” remembered Archbishop Borders, seated comfortably in his Timonium apartment at Mercy Ridge Retirement Community, his cane resting by his side.

“From that brought a realization of the broad scope of the church,” he said, “and the fact that every person and every group not only has an obligation but an opportunity to make a contribution to the lives of others and the mission of Christ for the church.”

Archbishop Borders reorganized archdiocesan central services into four departments, each with a cabinet-level secretary. He strengthened the role of the archdiocesan pastoral council and established a priests’ council from two previously existing boards.

The archbishop also created a division of research and planning to gather statistics

that could be used for shaping the direction of the archdiocese. Numerous other committees and commissions were established to encourage greater collaboration.

His most celebrated innovation was the vicariate system that divided the archdiocese into urban, eastern and western regions – each under the care of a vicar auxiliary bishop who had the authority to act in his name in most matters.

Nineteen years after Archbishop Borders retired, Baltimore still uses the vicariate system, which has been adopted by many dioceses around the country and the world. The archbishop occasionally gets calls from bishops interested in learning how it works – including one a few years ago from an auxiliary bishop of Paris who helped establish the system for that archdiocese.

“It’s a tremendous help because you had both the leadership of the priests in the different vicariates and they knew the people within their vicariate, and therefore they called forth the leadership,” said Archbishop Borders, his simple wooden crosier propped up humbly in a living room corner not far from stacks of books on the Second Vatican Council, modern popes and theology.

Anyone in a position of responsibility must recognize that he or she doesn’t have all the answers, Archbishop Borders insisted.

“You work with people where they are, and you discover any number of people in different fields that know a lot more than I do,” he explained with a laugh. That’s the key to good leadership, he said.

“You really look for people with background and competence and then support them,” he said, “and, boy, it works.”

In appointing leaders, Archbishop Borders reached out to women in a special way – naming them to key posts throughout the archdiocese in the understanding that “accepting the challenge of the gift of faith certainly isn’t limited by gender.”

In a similar way, the archbishop was sensitive to the African-American community. He nominated Father John Ricard, S.S.J., to become Baltimore’s first black auxiliary bishop.

The archbishop, however, didn't appoint people just to meet quotas. He looked for men and women who were highly qualified and committed to the church.

"It's unfair to appoint someone to a position who does not have either the experience or the knowledge to do the job," he said. "It's an act of injustice. So you have to be very careful."

Pursuing a collaborative approach meant that many voices were heard at the Catholic Center - not all of whom agreed. The archbishop tried to live his motto, "I will listen that I may serve," in how he dealt with those divergent voices.

One must "recognize the dignity and the sincerity of all people that you work with - including those who you don't agree with," he explained, "because you need to listen, and I've thought that all my life."

The Latin version of his motto, "Auscultabo ut Serviam," hangs in a wooden carving above a couch in the archbishop's living room, serving as a daily reminder of his commitment to maintaining an open ear.

Personal impact

When Archbishop Borders arrived in Baltimore, he was immediately confronted with serious challenges. The archdiocese was suffering a budget deficit and a religious order funding scandal. The city was dealing with striking police and sanitation workers, and there was a court-ordered school busing plan that heightened tensions.

"I really had to get involved in a calming emphasis," Archbishop Borders remembered.

At the same time he was dealing with those volatile issues, the new archbishop suffered a near-fatal heart attack while on retreat just a few months after arriving in Baltimore. He spent his first Charm City Christmas recuperating under an oxygen tent.

"It caused me to be realistic as far as what I had to do and what I didn't have to do," said Archbishop Borders, who had earlier escaped death while serving as an Army chaplain on the Allied front in Italy during World War II.

“You have to recognize limitations,” he said. “If you don’t, it’s going to catch up to you in any walk of life.”

Despite the health setback, Archbishop Borders continued his ministry and emerged as a prophetic voice in the city. His pastoral letters addressed topics like prayer, housing for the poor and health care ministry. It was a way of exercising his teaching role, he said.

Beyond writing, the archbishop visited all parts of the archdiocese and hosted a live monthly television show in Baltimore called “Realities.” Taking call-in questions from the audience, he tried to address important issues of the time.

Sometimes angry questions would make their way to the archbishop, who inevitably reworded the questions and answered them in a positive way on the air.

“That’s the real advantage of having so many years of teaching behind you,” Archbishop Borders said with a chuckle.

The archbishop acknowledged that not everyone agreed with him. He never minded those who had sincere differences, he said.

“People who manipulate get under my skin, but you can’t show it,” said Archbishop Borders, who is admired for being an approachable person of supreme composure.

As a naturally gregarious man who loves the company of others, one of the greatest challenges of being a bishop of a major diocese was not having ongoing personal contact with people like he did as a pastor and campus minister.

One of the archbishop’s great joys at Mercy Ridge, where he has lived for several years, is being able to celebrate Mass for the residents and interact with them as a priest, he said.

“I feel like a pastor again,” said Archbishop O’Brien, a joy-filled grin engulfing his entire face and almost forcing his eyelids shut.

Asked how he’s feeling as he approaches 95, Archbishop Borders quipped with characteristic good humor that he “can’t complain.”

“As an illustration that you change – I’ve lost five inches in height,” he said with a self-effacing smile. “That means that your bones are getting to be crooked and you’re feeling crooked.”

Although he suffers from arthritis and doesn’t have his former energy, Archbishop Borders does pushups and stretching exercises every day.

“If I don’t do it in the morning, I never get to it,” he said.

The archbishop was an avid golfer until about five years ago, proudly pointing out that “I could still break 90 until I was 70.”

Asked if he has the time to golf today, the bespectacled prelate unleashed his familiar grin and legendary wit.

“I may have the time,” he said, “but I don’t have the balance.”

Early in his retirement, Archbishop Borders was a much-sought lecturer. He also wrote a book about spiritual living in a secular society. These days, he remains an active reader and he visits his office at the Catholic Center in Baltimore once a week to answer correspondence and visit old friends.

Helping people to know they should love the Lord with all their heart, all their mind and all their strength, and they should love their neighbor as themselves has been the archbishop’s main message throughout his episcopate, he said.

“That’s the heart of the Gospel and everything flows from that,” he said. Knowing what he knows now, would he say yes to the pope if he could go back in time four decades?

“I’d probably respond just as I did then,” he said. “Human nature and personal traits and character do not change. We just adjust with mistakes.”

Visit www.catholicreview.org to watch clips of The Catholic Review interview with Archbishop Borders.