

Archbishop Borders, champion of collegiality and social justice, dies at 96

Archbishop William D. Borders, the 13th spiritual shepherd of the Baltimore archdiocese, died April 19 at Stella Maris Hospice in Timonium.

He was 96 and had been battling colon cancer.

Renowned for his commitment to collegiality, social justice and a pastoral approach to leadership, Archbishop Borders led the archdiocese from 1974 to 1989, when he retired. He continued to reside in Baltimore throughout his retirement, maintaining an active priestly ministry well into the last year of his life.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien remembered Archbishop Borders as an extraordinary and faith-filled man of God. The Catholic Church and the people of the Baltimore archdiocese "benefitted immeasurably from his visionary leadership, indefatigable spirit and generous love," Archbishop O'Brien said.

"Archbishop Borders was a man of deep faith, great humility and great love for God, the Church and this archdiocese," Archbishop O'Brien said. "As a result, he was universally loved by the people of this local Church, by his brother bishops and priests, and by all who were blessed to call him archbishop, father, teacher, brother and friend."

Pope Paul VI appointed Archbishop Borders to be the founding bishop of the Diocese of Orlando in 1968. Just six years later, the pope transferred him to Baltimore - moving him from the nation's newest diocese to its oldest.

Upon his arrival, Archbishop Borders was faced with several serious challenges.

The archdiocese was suffering a budget deficit and a religious order funding scandal. Baltimore City was dealing with striking police and sanitation workers, and there was a court-ordered school busing plan that heightened tensions. The

archdiocese would later face Catholic school consolidations.

"I really had to get involved in a calming emphasis," Archbishop Borders remembered in a 2008 interview with The Catholic Review.

While 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," Archbishop Borders said. "You have to recognize limitations. If you don't, it's going to catch up to you in any walk of life."

Reaching out

Throughout his tenure in Baltimore, Archbishop Borders sought to engage more people in leadership roles 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," Archbishop Borders told The Catholic Review. "From that brought a realization of the broad scope of the church, 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.

Archbishop Borders' 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.

Baltimore still uses a modified version of the vicariate system, which many dioceses around the country and the world have adopted.

"It's a tremendous help," Archbishop Borders said, "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."

The archbishop, whose episcopal motto was "I will listen that I may serve," believed in heeding advice from others before reaching a decision.

"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 once explained.

Monsignor George Moeller, retired pastor of St. Joseph in Fullerton and former archdiocesan clergy personnel director, said Archbishop Borders nurtured faith and set the tone for others to serve as he did.

"He set the example of trying to listen to people and learn about them," Monsignor Moeller said, "and then respond to them in a kindly and Christ-like way."

Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski said he was greatly influenced by Archbishop Borders' pastoral letter on collegiality. Bishop Rozanski was a young priest at St. Anthony in Baltimore when the letter was released.

"It was a true inspiration," Bishop Rozanski said. "As a parish staff we read the letter together and we were inspired to seek ways of implementing it in the parish."

Wilmington Bishop W. Francis Malooly, who worked with Archbishop Borders as clergy personnel director, chancellor and vicar general, said his former boss was highly respected by his priests.

"What made him a great priest was his joy," Bishop Malooly said. "He was always

upbeat. No matter how dismal the picture was, he always had this sense of joy about him – kind of leaving it in God’s hands.”

Bishop Malooly said he took his own bishop’s motto, “Rejoice in the Lord,” partly in homage to the example set by Archbishop Borders.

Groundbreaking appointments

In appointing leaders, Archbishop Borders followed a groundbreaking path. He reached out to women and African Americans in a special way – naming them to key posts.

Sheila Kelly, retired executive director of the division of personnel services, was appointed by Archbishop Borders as the first woman in an executive position at the Catholic Center.

“He was very comfortable with women,” Kelly said. “He wasn’t just trying to make up for the way things may have been in the past. He believed we need to hear the voice of the whole church.”

Medical Mission Sister Jane Coyle, the former pastoral life director of Corpus Christi in Baltimore and the first woman appointed to lead a parish, said Archbishop Borders was a constant encouragement.

“He invited me to the various meetings with the priests and when the priests were on retreat,” she said. “He expected me to be a part of it. I think his legacy is that he had a marvelous understanding of Vatican II and encouraged it throughout the archdiocese. That’s no small thing.”

Archbishop Borders nominated Josephite Father John Ricard to become Baltimore’s first black auxiliary bishop.

Therese Wilson Favors, executive director of the Office of African American Catholic Ministries, noted that Archbishop Borders opened her office after black Catholic leaders petitioned the archbishop to establish it.

“Understanding the critical need to address racism and its impediment in advancing

evangelization among African-Americans, Archbishop Borders positioned this office within his cabinet," she said.

Archbishop Borders told The Catholic Review in 2008 he 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 that 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."

The archbishop's concern for racial equality stretched back to the earliest years of his priesthood. When he became pastor of Holy Family Church in Port Allen, Louisiana, in 1957, he struggled with how to desegregate his parish.

"There was a section roped off for black people," Archbishop Borders remembered in a 1989 interview for a tribute magazine at his retirement. Worried about how he was going to get rid of the ropes" without causing a riot" the archbishop "prayed some."

"Then I bought a can of coal oil, took off the ropes and quietly burned them," he said.

Within six months, African-American parishioners gradually integrated throughout the church.

Concern for social justice

Throughout his priesthood, Archbishop Borders was concerned with issues of social justice. He met with union leaders and civil rights activists like Cesar Chavez. Among his many pastoral letters and statements written while in Baltimore included letters on the desegregation of Baltimore City public schools, women in the church, housing for the poor, increased lay involvement in the church, nuclear deterrence and human sexuality.

"I believe that in time to come, his pastoral letters will be points of reference for people who see the church moving forward and trying to be inclusive and collegial

together,” said Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Rosalie Murphy, who Archbishop Borders appointed the first director of the Division of Collegial Services.

“We received requests from Europe for copies of his statement on collegiality,” she said. “It provided the theological context for calling forth people for ministry. I think that was a very significant contribution and will stay long after he’s gone.”

A strong supporter of Catholic Charities, Archbishop Borders oversaw significant expansion in the outreach agency’s work with the poor. Our Daily Bread, a downtown soup kitchen that grew to become Catholic Charities’ most well known ministry, started during his tenure.

“Our Daily Bread was right next door to his house,” remembered Harold Smith, the retired executive director of Catholic Charities whom Archbishop Borders hired. “I think he always felt very proud of the fact that the people were being served right next to his house. He would walk back to his house in morning or at the end of work day and would always talk to people there.”

At the invitation of the Chinese government, Archbishop Borders visited the People’s Republic of China in 1981 with Catholic college presidents to study exchange programs with the U.S.

Setting new policy

Richard Berndt, managing partner of Gallagher, Evelius and Jones, the law firm that represents the Archdiocese of Baltimore, said Archbishop Borders was a pioneer among the national hierarchy in combating clergy sexual abuse.

The archbishop put in place the process for investigating and removing priests accused of abuse, Berndt said, and he made it more transparent than it had ever been.

“That had not been the past policy,” Berndt said, noting that the chancellor or the archbishop himself would also meet with the parish when a priest was facing removal. “That was not a popular policy among many Catholics and some priests.”

Berndt remembered that Archbishop Borders called four large forums on sexual

abuse for all religious order and archdiocesan priests.

"We spoke about pedophilia and he was clear how he was going to deal with it," Berndt said. "To me, it was a watershed moment for the church in America because other bishops were hearing about this but none of them were doing this and it made a huge difference in the way he was able to deal with priests who had that problem after that because he had laid out all the groundwork."

The archbishop made clear that he would not be empathetic to the abusers, Berndt said.

A pastoral heart

The third of seven children, Archbishop Borders was born at his parents' home in Indiana during a flood that lifted the family's house from its foundation.

He began his studies for the priesthood in 1932 in Indiana, but transferred to New Orleans' Notre Dame Seminary in 1936. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1940 and served as an associate pastor in Baton Rouge.

In 1943, two years after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Archbishop Borders enlisted in the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps and served with the 91st Infantry in North Africa and Italy. He was awarded an honorable discharge in 1946, with the rank of major, and a Bronze Star for Valor for carrying a wounded soldier to safety while under fire.

Seeing men die in battle shaped Archbishop Borders' humble, collaborative approach to leadership, according to Father Richard T. Lawrence. "He had all the fear drained out of him in the first few years of his priesthood," said Father Lawrence, pastor of Baltimore's St. Vincent de Paul, adding that the archbishop exhibited pure courage on the battlefield and that was how he ministered as well.

After the war, he was assigned as the associate pastor at Our Lady of Prompt Succor in Westwego, La. He earned a masters of science in education at the University of Notre Dame in 1947.

Upon completing his studies, he resumed parish ministry, sent next to Our Lady of Lourdes in New Orleans. He served as assistant chaplain and then chaplain of

Louisiana State University.

He was also a pastor of Holy Family Church in Port Allen, La., and rector of St. Joseph Cathedral in Baton Rouge, La. During that period, he served as a diocesan consultor, director of seminarians and as moderator for the diocesan councils of Catholic Men and Women.

During his ministry in Baltimore, Archbishop Borders hosted a local television talk show called "Realities" and was well known for engaging people on everyday issues.

Early in his retirement, Archbishop Borders was a much-sought lecturer. He also wrote a book about spiritual living in a secular society, published by Cathedral Foundation Press.

Until recently, the archbishop visited his office at the Catholic Center in Baltimore once a week to answer correspondence and visit old friends. He celebrated the sacraments at Mercy Ridge, where he had lived for several years.

In 2008, he told The Catholic Review that helping people to know they should love the Lord with all their heart, all their mind and all their strength, and that they should love their neighbor as themselves, has been the archbishop's main message throughout his episcopate.

"That's the heart of the Gospel," Archbishop Borders said, "and everything flows from that."

Paul McMullen, Matt Palmer, Suzanne Molino Singleton and Jennifer Williams contributed to this story.