

Head of National Office for Black Catholics dies

SEATTLE – A funeral Mass was celebrated May 12 in a chapel at Seattle University for Walter Hubbard Jr., a national African-American Catholic leader who had headed the Seattle-based National Office for Black Catholics since 1970.

Mr. Hubbard, 82, died May 5 in Seattle. No cause of death was given. He had served for two decades on Jesuit-run Seattle University's board of regents.

Born in New Orleans Oct. 19, 1924, he worked as a skilled cloth-cutter in the garment industry. He later became active in the trade union movement, serving as president of local unions in Seattle that represented garment workers and liquor store clerks, before becoming an insurance company executive.

After fighting against the Nazis with the Army in Europe during World War II, Mr. Hubbard returned home to fight multiple enemies in racism, bigotry and discrimination.

From 1966 to 1970, he was executive director of Project Caritas, a youth and adult education program in Seattle.

In the 1970s he worked for the Washington State Human Rights Commission as a contract-compliance specialist responsible for the enforcement of a federal court order that opened the work in the building trades to blacks and women.

In church life, Mr. Hubbard served from 1973 to 1980 as chair of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice. Mr. Hubbard in 1964 also was the founding president of Seattle's chapter of the Catholic Interracial Council, and in 1971 founded the Seattle Black Catholic Lay Caucus.

Even in what others would consider their retirement years, Mr. Hubbard stayed active, serving from 1998 to 2006 as chair of Washington state's personnel appeals board. In 2000, he helped found and served as first chair of the Institute for Public Service Training for African-American Men and Women, established in collaboration

with Seattle University and the University of Washington.

In 1989, Mr. Hubbard offered to broker talks between the Archdiocese of Washington and a black priest, Father George Stallings, when the priest left the Catholic Church, but the offer was rebuffed. Father Stallings ultimately founded his own denomination, resulting in his automatic excommunication, and became an archbishop of that denomination in the process.

In 1993, the National Office for Black Catholics issued a document urging Pope John Paul II to make priestly celibacy optional as a way to fight the shortage of priests and “clerical sexual scandals.” The document cited a history of “various waves of campaigns to force the human-made rule of celibacy on diocesan priests,” but said each campaign had been met with “an eventual wave of clerical sexual scandals,” including adultery and active homosexuality.

When it was issued, a spokesman for the U.S. bishops’ conference criticized the document’s linkage of celibacy with sex scandals, calling it “an unfair rap against celibacy.”

Also that year, in an interview with Catholic News Service, Mr. Hubbard said the National Office for Black Catholics stood ready to help in anti-violence efforts because violence not only “affects the whole family structure, but the whole African-American community and the larger community as well.” Still, with limited resources against such a massive problem, it’s tough to know where to begin, he conceded.

Key to any effort, Mr. Hubbard added, is providing economic opportunities to counter the lure of drug money and mentoring for young black males up to the age of 30.

In 1990, he expressed skepticism over whether the federal budget would help the poor, suggesting that gains poor families could make with the Earned Income Tax Credit would be negated by hikes in regressive federal excise taxes on cigarettes, alcohol, gasoline and telephone service.

Presciently, he said added increases in Medicare payments by patients are “a real concern”; that year’s budget achieved \$10 billion in Medicare savings through

higher out-of-pocket costs to beneficiaries.

He saw similar political gamesmanship in 1997. "I think the funds for these prisons are going to be found from all these cuts in social spending," he told CNS. "I think it's necessary for some changes in government policy." He was reacting to a speaker at the Million Man March that year who predicted reductions in social programs.

Mr. Hubbard also lamented the lack of focus on civil rights and racial reconciliation. "I look back at the civil rights movement 25, 30 years ago. We've gone three decades (away) now," Mr. Hubbard said in 1997. "Men and women who were 5 years old then are now 35. What was really lost back then is the ability to come together and dialogue. Here we are in a country that has an abundance of wealth in many ways, but we can't find a way to bring these resources together."

Mr. Hubbard is survived by Frances, his wife of 59 years, two daughters, two sons and three grandchildren. The Hubbards made Seattle their home in 1951; he had trained for the war at Fort Lewis, Wash.

A scholarship fund for African-American students at Seattle University has been established in his name.