

Heaven 13, Archdiocese 0

With few real ties to the Archdiocese of Baltimore prior to my appointment as Archbishop of this historic See, I was deprived of the privilege of knowing Archbishop William Borders until I arrived here in the fall of 2007. Thus, many of you, good readers, know better than I the man who served as the 13th Archbishop of Baltimore.

His episcopal motto was, *Auscultabo ut Serviam*: “I will listen that I may serve.” This phrase would come to epitomize both the leadership and personal style of a man whom I respected and admired both for the depth of his faith in God, and also for his belief in the goodness of others.

I witnessed this first-hand in my encounters with him over the past two-and-a-half years, including in the final weeks before his death. In my brief visits with him, I found him cheered by his faith, in spite of the certain and significant pain he was in, and both interested and concerned about everything happening in the Archdiocese.

Throughout his priestly life, the Archbishop also ardently supported and promoted Catholic education. He served as chaplain at Louisiana State University, founded and ran a seminary in Baton Rouge, and chaired the U.S. Bishops Conference’s education committee. In addition, he wrote numerous pastorals on issues ranging from desegregation of Baltimore public schools to housing for the poor to nuclear deterrence, and even returned to teach in the classroom following his retirement in 1989.

That commitment to education was strongly tested when he arrived to Baltimore in 1974. This was a time when many of the factors that challenge our inner city Catholic schools today were beginning to take a toll on the Catholic school system.

Buoyed by his convictions, the Archbishop began what was up to then the most thorough and comprehensive study of our Catholic school system - one that helped serve as a guide for our most recent study. At his retirement dinner, tribute was paid to him for his willingness to make “difficult but necessary decisions to reorganize schools in order to make them stronger” and cited his “firm resolve to insure the health of the school system.”

He would call on those same convictions as he sought to protect the dignity of others. In 1957, as a young pastor in Louisiana, he one day quietly burned the ropes that were used to segregate the pews reserved for African-Americans. He held the first interracial meeting in a southern state, calling black and white students together for a meeting of LSU’s Newman Club. These beliefs followed him to Baltimore when, soon after his arrival, a federal judge ordered busing to desegregate public schools. As tempers flared, the Archbishop quickly went on TV to encourage cooperation and recommended parents ride with their children until the unrest quelled.

He advocated similarly for women, migrant workers and the poor.

The Archbishop was the first American bishop to interpret the U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral on Economics for his diocese. He oversaw the greatest period of expansion of Catholic Charities, earning him the title, “King of Soup Kitchens and Shelters,” by Baltimore Magazine.

Always humble, the Archbishop credited his personal strengths to the love and example of his parents - hard-working, deeply spiritual people who taught him to treat everyone alike, the value of hard work and to live his life with integrity. These basic tenets were the basis for his life and what most endeared him to the people he encountered throughout every stop along his journey to heaven, including his final days.

On a recent visit, accompanied by retired Auxiliary Bishop William Newman and my priest secretary, Father Adam Parker, I approached the Archbishop's room where I was greeted by two housekeepers at the door. One of the women said, with emotion, "You are entering the room of an angel."

This Archdiocese has been blessed with gifted leaders throughout its storied history. Many of them were famous in their day and remembered still for their dynamic personalities or the publicity their actions garnered. He may not fit either of these descriptions, but the life and service of the priest from the small town in Indiana who would become the 13th Archbishop of the Premier See of the United States, was no less significant and should never be forgotten.