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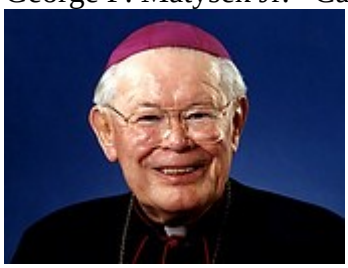
Archbishop Borders of Baltimore, dies at 96

George P. Matysek Jr. Catholic News Service | Apr. 20, 2010



Retired Archbishop William D. Borders of Baltimore (CNS file photo)

BALTIMORE -- Archbishop William D. Borders, who retired in 1989 as the 13th archbishop of Baltimore, died April 19 at Mercy Ridge Retirement Community in the Baltimore suburb of Timonium.

He was 96 and had been battling colon cancer. He was the fourth-oldest living Catholic bishop in the United States at the time of his death.

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

"Archbishop Borders was a man of deep faith, great humility and great love for God, the church and this archdiocese," said Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, the current archbishop of Baltimore. "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."

Funeral arrangements were incomplete.

Pope Paul VI appointed Archbishop Borders to be the founding bishop of the Diocese of Orlando, Fla., 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.

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 Christmas in Baltimore 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."

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.

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, La., 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.

Throughout his priesthood, Archbishop Borders was concerned with issues of social justice. He met with union leaders and civil rights activists such as 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.

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."

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 Parish, adding that the archbishop exhibited pure courage on the battlefield and that was how he ministered as well.

After the war, Archbishop Borders was assigned as the associate pastor at Our Lady of Prompt Succor in Westwago, La. He earned a master's degree in education at the University of Notre Dame in 1947.

Upon completing his studies, he resumed parish ministry and was 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.

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.

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

Retired Bishop McFarland of Orange, Calif., dies at age 88

By Catholic News Service

ORANGE, Calif. (CNS) -- Retired Bishop Norman F. McFarland of Orange, who led the diocese for 11 years until his 1998 retirement, died April 16 after a brief illness. He was 88.

A funeral Mass was to be celebrated April 23 at Holy Family Cathedral in Orange.

Bishop McFarland was known throughout his episcopal career as a top financial manager, including keeping what was then the Diocese of Reno-Las Vegas out of bankruptcy with eight days of phone calls to his fellow bishops to provide grants or long-term loans to help out the diocese, which had been laid low by a series of bad investments.

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