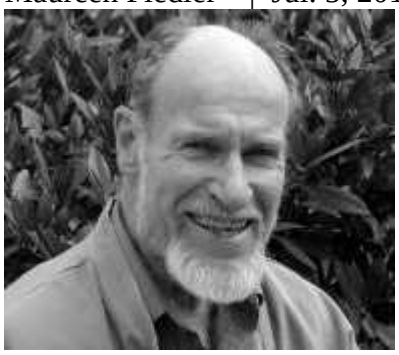
NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

William Callahan, peace, justice champion, dies

Maureen Fiedler | Jul. 5, 2010


William Callahan

Father William R. Callahan, an international leader in movements for social justice, peace, and reform of the Roman Catholic Church, died July 5th at Community Hospice Hospital in Washington, DC due to complications from Parkinson?s disease. He was 78.

Callahan, a Jesuit until the early 1990?s, was dedicated to the justice call of the reformist Second Vatican Council [1962-1965] in the Roman Catholic Church. He was best known for his leadership for peace and justice in Central America, especially in Nicaragua, and for his advocacy of gender equality in the Catholic Church, including women?s ordination.

In the 1970s, he became a nationally known speaker on social justice and the spirituality of justice. In 1982, he published *Noisy Contemplation: Deep Prayer for Busy People*, which is a classic in contemporary spirituality. Deep prayer does not require the silence of a monastery, he said. Ordinary people can pray in the midst of noise and activism. ?We are blessed with a merry God; indeed, we are the entertainment,? he said in the book ? with a flash of the humor for which he was famous.

His activism began after he entered the New England Province of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in 1948. He pushed his community to take a strong stand for civil rights. In 1971, he helped found the Center of Concern in Washington, DC, a progressive Catholic think-tank dealing with global justice issues. In 1975, he launched Priests for Equality, calling for the equality of women and men in all walks of life, including ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood. In 1976, together with Dolly Pomerleau and Jesuit Father Bill Michelman, he founded the Quixote Center [1], where ? as he put it ? ?people could dream impossible dreams of justice and make them come true.?

In the tradition of Cervantes? Quixote, Bill believed in ?tilting at windmills? even when the world thought it foolish, reaching for stars that seem too distant to be touched. He often said that the work of justice should be done with laughter and merriment and creativity.

He turned his dreams into action, summoning thousands of people to join struggles for justice. He challenged his church on gender equality as a plenary speaker at the first Women?s Ordination Conference in 1975. He launched the inclusive language project of the Quixote Center, which eventually published both the *Inclusive Language Lectionaries for Mass*

and *The Inclusive Bible*, a non-racist, non-homophobic, non-sexist translation for common use.

tIn 1978, he began several years of ministry with Good Shepherd Catholics for Shared Responsibility, a lay group that had been disenfranchised by Bishop Thomas Welsh, in the then newly created Diocese of Arlington, VA. Welsh?s policies had drifted away from the teachings and spirit of the Second Vatican Council, and these laypeople had been accustomed to active participation in their parish.

In 1980, Bill was silenced by the Jesuits on the issue of women?s ordination, but resumed his public stance a year later. In the late 1980s, he founded Catholics Speak Out, a project of the Quixote Center that encouraged lay Catholics to take adult responsibility for the direction of their church.

In the late 1970s, he embraced the struggles of the poor in Central America, especially Nicaragua and El Salvador, becoming an outspoken opponent of the Reagan war policies in the 1980s. Together with Dolly Pomerleau, he directed the Quest for Peace, a multi-million dollar program of humanitarian aid and development funding for the people of Nicaragua who were victims of the ?contra war? waged by the Reagan Administration.

Three times, the Quest for Peace set out to match Congressional appropriations of ?contra aid? with humanitarian aid for the victims of that war. Callahan and Pomerleau mobilized grassroots activists across the country, and U.S. citizens matched a total of $227 million in war funding with the same value in humanitarian aid. For Callahan, ?development funding? was not ?charity;? it was a means to challenge injustice and change structures that keep people poor and oppressed.

He traveled to Nicaragua time and again, working with the Institute of John XXIII at the Jesuit University in Managua to channel the aid most effectively. He was an eloquent public spokesperson against the contra war, a stance which led him to testify in Congress against the economic embargo levied against Nicaragua.

In 1989, the New England Province of the Jesuits, at the direction of the Vatican, threatened Callahan with dismissal unless he severed his ties with the Quixote Center, Priests for Equality, and Catholics Speak Out, and returned to Boston. He refused to abandon his work with Nicaragua, or for reform of the church. Consequently, he was dismissed from the Society of Jesus in the early 1990?s, a move he strenuously resisted. It is not clear to this day what specific issue(s) motivated his final dismissal from the New England Jesuits.

In 1991, he became involved in the struggles of Haiti, calling for the re-instatement of the elected but ousted Jean Bertrand Aristide as President. He helped the Quixote Center launch a program called Haiti Reborn, providing aid for the poor of Haiti, especially in the area of reforestation.

Over the years, he guided many projects that the Center initiated, some of which spun off to become independent. These include: New Ways Ministry, a gay-positive ministry of advocacy and justice for lesbian and gay Catholics, the successful Karen Silkwood case on nuclear safety issues (completed by the Christic Institute), and Equal Justice/USA ? a project opposing the death penalty.

In the last 20 years, although not a Jesuit, he remained a priest and ministered in several intentional Eucharistic communities in the Washington, DC area.

He was an organic gardener, known in his neighborhood for a plot that was somewhat jungle-like, yet highly productive. He lived a simple lifestyle. His bed was often a mat on the floor (next to the winter squash he had just harvested), his clothes were bargain basement specials or Nicaraguan shirts, and he was content to eat just about anything that wasn?t moving.

He was also a dedicated runner. Even when his disease was slowing his ability to walk, he ran the Army 10-mile

race (wearing a peace t-shirt, naturally). He called himself the ?Parkinson Turtle? and finished the course.

Callahan received a Ph.D. in Physics from John Hopkins University in 1962, and was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1965. While studying for his doctorate, he worked for NASA and Goddard Space Center on weather satellites.

He is survived by Dolly Pomerleau, his partner in ministry for 40 years, and by several brothers and sisters: Larry Callahan, Polly Alonso, John Callahan, Bob Callahan, Helen Demers, and Christine DeVelis. He is also survived by Isabelle Griffin, a cousin with whom he was raised by his grandmother.

He was a resident of Brentwood, MD in suburban Washington, DC.

Callahan donated his body to Georgetown University Medical School. In lieu of flowers, those who want to pay tribute to him may make donations to: ?Quixote Center/Bill Callahan Memorial Fund,? P.O. Box 5206, Hyattsville, MD 20782. The funeral mass will take place at the Quixote Center. The date and time will be posted at Caringbridge [2]

Source URL (retrieved on *04/17/2014 - 23:57*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/william-callahan-peace-justice-champion-dies

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/2229
[2] http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/billcallahan