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Priest remembered as champion of justice, reform

Maureen Fiedler | Jul. 29, 2010

Fr. William R. Callahan, left, an international leader in movements for peace and social justice, is pictured during a 1977 march in Washington. (CNS file photo)

APPRECIATION

BRENTWOOD, MD. -- ?Were not our hearts burning within us when he spoke to us?? Those were the words of a sister of Notre Dame, recalling the hundreds of times Fr. Bill Callahan spoke to women in religious communities about the importance of work for justice.

That question seemed to capture in one sentence what the 300 people in the room were feeling. It was one of dozens of tributes offered at a Mass of the Resurrection July 10 at Thomas Stone Elementary School, not far from the Quixote Center, which Callahan cofounded.

Callahan died of complications from Parkinson?s disease on July 5 at Community Hospice Hospital in Washington. He was 78.

Others offering tributes told stories of Callahan?s tenderness. ?I?d find him in the backroom singing lullabies to my baby,? said Jane Henderson, who had two children while working at the Quixote Center, and would often bring them to work.

Jesuit Fr. Peter Henriot, with whom Callahan helped found the Center of Concern, sent a message from Africa, saying how much he had learned from working with Callahan.

Others talked about his doggedness and humor: his annual run in the Army 10-mile race (in a peace T-shirt, of course) in spite of his Parkinson?s disease -- calling himself the ?Parkinson Turtle?; the time he sank six putts in a row on the golf course from more than 10 feet; and the times this spring when he could not walk and crawled on the ground to reach his garden and pick strawberries.

The Mass of the Resurrection might have been called the ?Mass of a Resurrected Church,? representing

Callahan?s spirit and the reform causes he championed. It was concelebrated by a married priest from Baltimore, Fred Ruof, and by Andrea Johnson, ordained a priest and elected a bishop in the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement.

Lively music was provided by the NOVA Community, one of the intentional eucharistic communities that Callahan served in the last decade.

Callahan, a Jesuit until the early 1990s, was dedicated to the justice call of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). 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 spirituality and social justice. In 1982, he published *Noisy Contemplation: Deep Prayer for Busy People*, 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 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, 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 priesthood. In 1976, he cofounded, with Dolly Pomerleau and Jesuit Fr. Bill Michelman, the Quixote Center, where -- as he put it -- ?people could dream impossible dreams of justice and make them come true.?

In the tradition of Cervantes? Quixote, Callahan 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.

In 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 Arlington, Va., diocese. Welsh?s policies had drifted away from the teachings and spirit of Vatican II, and these laypeople had been accustomed to active participation in their parish.

In 1980, Callahan 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, and he became an outspoken opponent of the Reagan war policies in the 1980s. Together with Pomerleau, he directed the Quest for Peace, a multimillion-dollar program of humanitarian aid and development funding for Nicaraguans who were victims of the contra war waged by the Reagan administration. Three times, 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 grass-roots activists across the country, and U.S. citizens matched a total of $227 million in war funding with the same value in humanitarian aid.

Callahan traveled to Nicaragua time and again, working with the Institute of John XXIII at the Jesuit university

in Managua to channel the aid effectively. He was an eloquent public spokesperson against the contra war, a stance that 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 1990s, a move he strenuously resisted. It is not clear to this day what specific issues motivated his final dismissal.

In 1991, Callahan became involved in the struggles of Haiti, calling for the reinstatement 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 country?s poor, especially in the area of reforestation.

Over the years, Callahan 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 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.

Callahan received his undergraduate and master?s degrees from Boston College and a doctorate in physics from John Hopkins University in 1962. He was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1965. While studying for his doctorate, he worked for NASA and its Goddard Space Flight Center on weather satellites.

He is survived by Pomerleau, his partner in ministry for 40 years. They married only five days before he died. He is also survived 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.

[Loretto Sr. Maureen Fiedler is the host of ?Interfaith Voices,? a public radio show, heard on 62 radio stations in North America.]

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