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Shriver's godfather, Cardinal James Gibbons

George P. Matysek Jr. Catholic News Service | Jan. 26, 2011

BALTIMORE -- Since the Jan. 18 death of R. Sargent Shriver, much has been written about his work with the Peace Corps and the Special Olympics, his relationship to one of America's most famous political families and his role as the last pro-life Democrat nominated to a presidential ticket.

But little has been said about his famous godfather.

Born in Westminster, Md., Nov. 9, 1915, Shriver was baptized by legendary Baltimore Cardinal James Gibbons, a family friend who served as his godfather.

The internationally known prelate was a frequent guest at the Shriver homestead in Union Mills, and his young godson often served as an altar boy when the cardinal celebrated private Masses in the family chapel.

The Shrivers owned the B.F. Shriver Co., a canning corporation with about half a dozen factories in Maryland's Carroll County. Young Sargent attended St. John School in Westminster for first through third grades. After his family moved to Baltimore in 1923 when his father took a banking job, Shriver transferred to the "old" Cathedral School in Baltimore for grades four through seven. He later went to the Canterbury School in New Milford, Conn.

In a 1994 interview with The Catholic Review, Baltimore archdiocesan newspaper, Shriver reminisced about how service was imbedded in his genes. He served in the Kennedy administration as the director of the Peace Corps. In the Lyndon Johnson administration, Shriver started Head Start and numerous other social service programs as the top general in the war on poverty.

Shriver later served as President Johnson's ambassador to France when French President Charles de Gaulle was asserting his nation's independence and "making it a tense time" for Franco-American relations, Shriver said.

It was during that time when Ambassador Shriver and his wife, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, began a program benefiting French children with disabilities.

"Eunice rolled up the rugs of the embassy and had handicapped children in playing games," Shriver said.

The former ambassador recalled that President de Gaulle's wife, Yvonne, requested a meeting with Mrs. Shriver after learning of the program. Unknown to the Shrivers, the de Gaulles had a daughter with Down syndrome.

"If we had been briefed by the CIA," Shriver said, "we couldn't have touched a more sensitive spot in a good way."

With the support of her husband, Eunice Kennedy Shriver founded the Special Olympics in 1968. Sargent Shriver would go on to work as president of the Special Olympics from 1984 to 1996 and chairman of the board of directors from 1990 to 2003.

After returning to the United States in 1970, Shriver was tapped to be Sen. George McGovern's vice-presidential running mate in the 1972 contest with President Richard Nixon and Vice President Spiro T. Agnew of Maryland. The McGovern-Shriver ticket lost in a landslide.

A daily Mass communicant and dedicated pro-life supporter, Shriver ran for president himself in 1976 at a time when some newspapers reported that he was against a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion. It's a charge Shriver denied in his 1994 Catholic Review interview.

"I am not against a constitutional amendment on abortion," said Shriver. He added, however, that he didn't think an amendment had a chance of passing.

"In a secular society," he said, "secular laws are not exactly the same as the moral laws. In this society with a wide variety of religions, it's unlikely that our secular laws will ever be in full agreement."

Shriver and his wife campaigned against Maryland's permissive abortion laws in 1992. They spoke at a pro-life rally at the Turf Valley Hotel and Country Club in Howard County as voters were considering a referendum on the issue. That same year, a presidential election year, he joined his wife and other pro-life Democrats in signing a full-page New York Times political advertisement titled, "A New Compact of Care: Caring about Women, Caring for the Unborn."

Shriver never forgot his Maryland ties. He and his wife gave a life-size portrait of Cardinal Gibbons to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1989. The painting had been in their private collection for years.

Although Shriver was to be buried next to his wife in Massachusetts, it seems he had at one time longed for a different option. In his Catholic Review interview, Shriver spoke of returning to his beloved Carroll County. He recalled visiting old Westminster friends such as Eddie Weant, a lawyer who lived in the same house where he had been born.

"I had kicked around the world, been everywhere, seen everybody, done everything," Shriver said. "Was I any better than Eddie? Did I know anything about life or people he didn't know? Was Willis Street any less interesting than Fifth Avenue, New York? I'm not sure.

"All I do know is that Eddie and Sally have lived a full and rewarding life and almost all the values they rely upon are the same ones I learned here," Shriver added. "No wonder I long ago bought a burial plot in St. John's Cemetery where I hope (to be buried) one day. Then I'll be back in Westminster where I belong -- for good."

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