

'Good Bishop' Walter Sullivan shows how to be good Christians in bad times

John Dear | Apr. 30, 2013 On the Road to Peace

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that if our righteousness does not surpass that of the religious authorities, we will not enter the reign of God.

It's a shocking instruction. He seems to have learned early on that power corrupts, and not just politicians, but professional religious people, too. If professional religious authorities do not break out of the trappings of power, authority, money and cultic privilege, if they do not embody the beatitudes and struggle for justice and peace, they will not enter the reign of God. I think he means not just in the next life, but here and now, in this life, where the reign of God is at hand.

We see this play out everywhere today, where our religious leaders go along with the culture of violence and war and remain silent in the face of war making, nuclear weapons, poverty and violence. They fear rocking the boat, so they do nothing, protect their money, stay close to their benefactors, accept whatever the military tells them and reject the way of the cross. Or if they speak, they only denounce abortion, claiming to be pro-life even though they actively support U.S. war making and nuclear weapons. In doing so, they come across to the faithful as radically pro-death. They remain clueless to the prophetic vocation which Jesus calls us all to live in the Sermon on the Mount.

The exceptions, of course, make the rule, and one great exception was my friend Walter Sullivan, bishop of Richmond, Va., and former president of Pax Christi USA who died Dec. 11.

In recent years, he had been cooperating with writer Phyllis Theroux, and her wonderful new book, *The Good Bishop: The Life of Walter F. Sullivan* [1], has just been published. *The Good Bishop* offers a rare portrait of an authentic religious leader, one who put the poor first, practiced the Sermon on the Mount and tried to help us all follow the nonviolent Jesus. His story is inspiring in its humanity and a sign of hope for us to carry on our own Gospel journey.

For the many of us who were his friends, the title rings true. Walter Sullivan was a good man and a good bishop. Still, I find the title disturbing. One would presume that every bishop -- and every priest, minister and cardinal -- is "good." Alas, that is not the case, certainly not the public perception of bishops these days. Most religious officials these days seem better suited to be corporate CEOs who spend their time with accountants, lawyers and bankers. Most come across like executives for Goldman Sachs or Enron, not as servants of the poor or heralds of a world without war and nuclear weapons. The title says in effect, "Look! We found one 'good' bishop!" Of course, there are two or three others -- Raymond Hunthausen, Leroy Matthiesen and the great Thomas Gumbleton. But these days, few people would call any bishop "good," and that is a tragedy. Nonetheless, it's inspiring to read the story of Walter Sullivan and learn all he did.

As one friend remembers: Walter had no pretense. That's what made him so unusual: He was a bishop without any pretense.

I knew Walter Sullivan for decades, traveled extensively with him and eventually moved to Richmond in part to work with him. We served together on the Pax Christi National Council for years and journeyed to El Salvador and Rome together. Everyone in the peace movement called him "Walter," which was a shock to the good people of Virginia.

In the mid-1990s, I served as executive director of the Sacred Heart Center, a community center for low-income African-American women and children in Richmond. It was a great project, with 40 staff workers and a \$2 million annual budget that we raised from scratch each year. Every Friday for two years, Walter took me out to lunch at the Spaghetti Factory. We discussed the center, the diocese, the peace movement, the church and the world. He was a great mentor and friend.

But I learned so much more about him in Theroux's new book. Unlike most CEO bishops, Walter made a commitment right from the start to prisoners. He visited death row, said Mass regularly at jails and corresponded with and befriended many prisoners over the decades. His action scandalized and inspired the public, but he didn't care. Walter had read the Gospel and decided to try and live Matthew 25. That's what made him a true servant-leader.

For 29 years, Walter served the diocese of Richmond very well. Throughout the years, he showed compassion for the poor and marginalized, embraced Protestant and Jewish believers, built housing for the elderly and visited every parish. He took special care of the elderly, embraced gays, championed those sentenced to be killed by the state, journeyed to Haiti, Nicaragua and El Salvador on solidarity missions, and welcomed everyone in the diocese.

And he denounced war fiercely. At one event in New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral, he said simply, "One way to put the Gospel of Jesus today is to say, 'No nukes.' We are not allowed to have nuclear weapons." He received fierce opposition from the military in Virginia Beach and throughout his diocese, but he saw that as a chance to remind people that we're supposed to be followers of the nonviolent Jesus. He knew the military and pro-war Catholics had never heard this Gospel message before, so he felt compassion for them.

Conservatives hated him and complained to Rome so much that eventually the Vatican investigated him and humiliated him. "I am a loyal son of the church," Walter said. "It is my home. But I am not a company man."

I knew some of what he went through, but *The Good Bishop* presents the whole picture, and it's an inspiring story, a true Gospel story. He could only be misunderstood because Virginia never had a prophetic leader in its history. He was dismissed, hated and denounced, but he kept going forward with his usual good cheer, befriending everyone he could and trying to promote the Gospel as best he could.

"People cannot experience God as long as they condone violence, or tolerate injustices, or acquiesce when human dignity and human rights are denied, or put trust in military armaments, or remain unresponsive to the plight of the poor," Walter wrote. Notice his message: You will not experience God if you do these things. His focus was not on the pope, money, power, privilege, authority or ownership; it was on God. That's the mark of one of those rare pastoral, post-Second Vatican Council bishops, but more, the mark of any good shepherd. A good shepherd leads us to God.

Last month, I met a brand new bishop, ordained only a few months. "I have no idea what to do," he confided. "There is no instruction manual."

"No problem," I said, "Read *The Good Bishop* by Phyllis Theroux about Walter Sullivan. Try to be like him and you, too, will be a good bishop."

I recommend the book not just for bishops and priests, but for all of us because in the end, Walter Sullivan shows us how to be good Christians in a bad time. He shows us how to live the Sermon on the Mount, points us back to God and gives us hope for what we could be. What a beautiful gift. Thank you, Walter!

To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to [John Dear's website](#) [2]. John is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace* [3] by Rosalie Reigle and with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* [4] by Deena Guzder. One of John's essays on Jesus' nonviolent action in the temple appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* [5]. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [6] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [7], *Put Down Your Sword* [8] and *A Persistent Peace* [9], are available from Amazon.com.

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[7] http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1

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