

The Good Bishop

The Life of Walter F. Sullivan

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Genre: Biography

Setting: Catholic Church in the United States, Diocese of Richmond, Va., before, during and after Vatican Council II

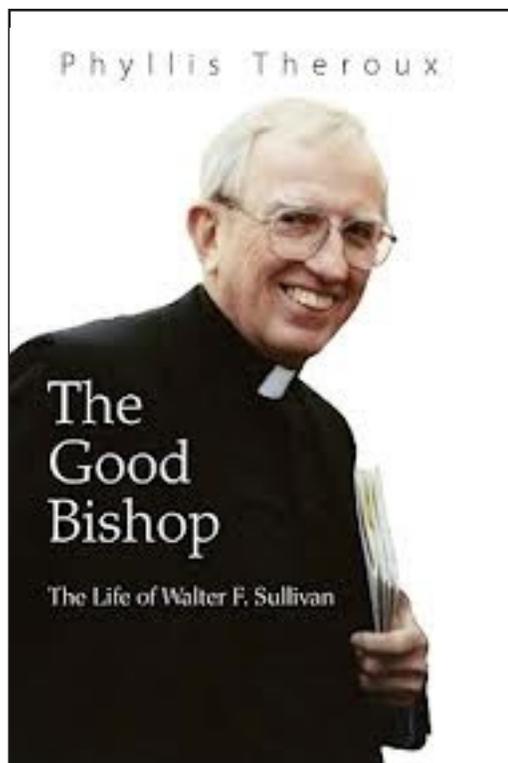
Synopsis

A verse in the Gospel of Mark captures the persona of Walter Sullivan, the late bishop of Richmond, Va.: “You do not regard a person’s status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth” (Mark 12:14).

Sullivan’s commitment to preaching and living the Gospel was recognized in 1982 when he received an honorary degree from Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Va. The citation accompanying the degree read: “Like the true shepherd who is not afraid of wolves, he teaches with courage and clarity.”¹

Phyllis Theroux’s biography is replete with stories of Sullivan taking positions on controversial issues of justice and peace. Where he stood on issues could be very unpopular, but that did not deter him from standing firm for what he understood to be non-negotiable in light of the Gospels and Catholic Social Tradition. He did not moderate his message to placate the “well-connected,” people and institutions that could inflict personal pain. The mayor of Richmond and the Richmond Times-Dispatch newspaper leveled bitter public criticism, while others withheld financial support.

The story of Sullivan’s service as bishop of Richmond provides many vignettes of how he comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. His biography recounts the many actions and words that merited him criticism from public officials, the press and those in his diocese who thought he was too extreme in advocating for peace and supporting the incarcerated. His courage in tackling hard questions regarding peace issues was typified in a 1981 talk at a parish near Naval Air Station Oceana. Many Catholics in the area were affiliated with the U.S. Navy.



The background for Sullivan’s talk was his membership in the Catholic peacemaking organization Pax Christi and Pope John Paul II’s trip to Hiroshima, Japan, which was devastated by an atomic bomb near the end of World War II. “I am absolutely convinced that if nothing is done, we are going to see a nuclear holocaust. And the way we’re going, we’ll bring it on ourselves,” Sullivan told the congregation of about 200. “What are the values we wish to proclaim? Are these values rooted in the Gospel of Jesus or rooted in blind national self-interest disguised as patriotism?”ⁱⁱ

He went on to condemn the U.S. government’s supply of weapons to El Salvador’s right-wing military government, which used these arms against its own people. Keep in mind that the Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, a critic of his government’s oppression, was slain by government assassins in 1980 while celebrating Mass. U.S. religious sisters Ita Ford, MM, Maura Clarke, MM, Dorothy Kazel, OSU, and laywoman Jean Donovan were martyred in El Salvador later that same year by a government militia.

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In 1989, six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered at the University of Central America in San Salvador.

After the bishop's talk, Virginia newspapers carried headlines such as "Bishop Upsets Military Crowd with Comments" and "Handling Nukes Immoral, Bishop Says."ⁱⁱⁱ

However, his commitment to working for peace was not Sullivan's only legacy. One of his priests, Msgr. Robert Perkins, best summarized his legacy in this way: "There were so many aspects of Walter's time as bishop that were huge: his creation of housing for the elderly, his outreach to the Jews, his ecumenical connections, his opposition to the death penalty, his commitment to justice and peace."^{iv}

Not only did Sullivan oppose the death penalty from his office and the pulpit, but he visited and befriended those on death row. In addition to his many acts of kindness toward individual prisoners, "Whenever an execution was scheduled at the Spring Street prison, Bishop Sullivan would lead a candlelight vigil procession from the cathedral or a church nearby the prison."^v

Sullivan was a bishop for more than 30 years in the Diocese of Richmond, serving as an auxiliary bishop from Dec. 1, 1970, to July 14, 1974, and as the ordinary of the diocese from July 19, 1974, to Sept. 16, 2003. He was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Richmond on May 9, 1953.

Catholic Social Teaching Connections

Life and Dignity of the Human Person: The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching... Human life is threatened by...the use of the death penalty... Catholic teaching calls on us to work to avoid war. Nations must protect the right to life by finding effective ways to prevent conflicts and resolve them by peaceful means.

"He wanted hands-on involvement. Walter would always tell the inmates that Jesus knew what it was like to be in prison. He would bring them the Eucharist and hear confessions... The first time I went with him to death row...the prisoners were put in cages... All of them were mentally slow but Walter treated them with dignity and respect. One of the prisoners was not getting adequate health care. Walter would visit him and advocate for him." (Eileen Dooley, head of the Peace and Justice Commission for the Diocese of Richmond, quoted in *The Good Bishop*, Page 64)

Rights and Responsibilities: The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met.

"I find it interesting that certain people have wanted to discredit the 'United for Justice' program in our diocese. They are basically attacking the efforts on the part of our diocese to respond to the needs of the poor, to work for the eradication of discrimination and racism, to promote disarmament and world peace, and to affirm human rights and equality for all people." (Sullivan, letter to Msgr. Clemente Facciani of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, quoted in *The Good Bishop*, p. 82)

Solidarity: We are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions in a shrinking world. At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of peace. Pope Paul VI taught that if you want peace, work for justice. The Gospel calls us to be peacemakers. Our love for all our sisters and brothers demands that we promote peace in a world surrounded by violence and conflict.

"He visited prisoners, celebrated Mass with the elderly, embraced gays, championed those sentenced to be killed by the state, and worked boldly to end the death penalty and the spread of nuclear armaments. Maybe, best of all, he was humble, treated us all like brothers..."
(*The Good Bishop*, p. 2)



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“On April 26, 1987, a bronze and copper figure of Rachel, surrounded by six tongues of flame, representing the six million Jews who were murdered, was installed on the ground of the Sacred Heart Cathedral (in Richmond). Her fingers are pressed against her eyes as she weeps. Beneath her, on a stone, is carved one word, “Remember,” in Hebrew and English. It was the first memorial to the Holocaust on the grounds of any Catholic church in the United States.” (The Good Bishop, p. 183)

Option for the Poor: A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the need of the poor and vulnerable first.

“He was deeply passionate about peace and justice, the care of the poor, the marginalized people. He had a very warm embrace for the left out. He was against all the injustices that keep people at the bottom.” (The Good Bishop, p. 192)

Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers: The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected – the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

“Seeing Appalachia firsthand, meeting its people, galvanized Sullivan into action. When the unions boycotted J.P. Stevens, the second-largest textile manufacturer in the country, Sullivan joined five other bishops who endorsed the unions. It was not a popular decision among some southern Catholics who criticized the bishop for stepping away from the pulpit.” (The Good Bishop, p. 90)

Call to Family, Community, and Participation:

The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society – in economics and politics, in law and policy - directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community... We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

“At the same time that Bishop Sullivan was trying to bring the diocese closer together, he also was trying to push at the edges to make more room for two groups... whose voices had either been muted or disregarded: women, and gays and lesbians... The bishop absolutely believed that women were equal to men, if not superior to them...” (The Good Bishop, p. 94)

Care of God's Creation: We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of God's creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

“But when the diocese expanded to include Appalachia, he immediately went west to see it for himself. He was dazzled by the beauty of the landscape and horrified by the ways it was being destroyed. King Coal dominated the culture and King Coal did what it wanted... Sullivan was devastated... He hurriedly signed on to a 1975 pastoral letter, ‘This Land is Home to You and Me’... It was a lyrical love letter to the people and land of Appalachia as well as an angry, plain-speaking indictment of corporate greed that scars the land and lives of the poor who live there.” (The Good Bishop, p. 89)

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Questions for Reflection

1. Bishop Walter Sullivan manifested much courage when he took positions on controversial issues in light of the Gospels and Catholic Social Tradition. In what ways have you shown similar courage? In what ways have you failed to show courage in light of your faith commitment and Catholic Social Tradition? What current social justice issues require our attention?
2. Bishop Sullivan was known and respected for visiting those in prison, especially those on death row, and his support for repealing the death penalty (cf. Matthew 25: 31-46 and *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995). Do you see his advocacy for prisoners and support for repealing the death penalty as a social justice issue? Why? Why not? Do you think the state has the right to take the lives of those who commit heinous crimes? Do you consider the execution of prisoners at correctional institutions a work of correction or of vengeance?
3. Bishop Sullivan, as a member of Pax Christi, worked to promote peace. What do you think is the most effective way to advocate for peace in the modern world? Who do you consider to be modern advocates for peace? Are you familiar with the work of Fr. John Dear, S.J.? Bishop Thomas Gumbleton? Pax Christi USA/International?
4. Bishop Sullivan tried to provide a “place at the table” for all in his diocese, even those who were not Catholics. He was inclusive, wanting to make sure women and gays were made to feel welcome, and he extended his hand in friendship and cooperation to Jews and Protestants in the Diocese of Richmond. Do you know of any current U.S. bishops taking a similar initiative? Do you think the work of social justice includes efforts to ensure that everyone has a place at the table? Was Jesus doing something similar when he enjoyed table fellowship with those on the fringes, such as sinners and tax collectors?
5. “The Good Bishop” tells us that Sullivan “visited prisoners, celebrated Mass with the elderly, embraced gays, championed those sentenced to be killed by the state...(and) treated us all like brothers.” Is this what solidarity looks like? How would you define solidarity?

Prayer

God, send forth your Spirit,
so that our hearts may be inflamed
with your love for the justice
that builds a right relationship
with you and all your children,
our brothers and sisters
who are on pilgrimage with us.

This we ask in the name of your Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen

Endnotes

- i Theroux, “The Good Bishop,” p. 195
- ii Ibid, p. 128
- iii Ibid, p. 129
- iv Ibid, p. 56
- v Ibid, p. 64

Additional Resources

National Catholic Reporter obituary by John Allen, Jr.: <http://ncronline.org/news/people/bishop-walter-sullivan-richmond-va-dead-84>

Reflection by Fr. John Dear, S.J.: <http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/good-bishop-walter-sullivan-teaches-us-how-be-good-christians-bad-times>

Report on Bishop Sullivan’s funeral: <http://wtvr.com/2012/12/19/hundreds-gather-for-bishop-sullivans-funeral/>

Pax Christi USA remembers Bishop Sullivan: <http://paxchristiusa.org/about/ambassadors-of-peace/remembering-bishop-walter-sullivan/>

“The Challenge of Peace:” <http://old.usccb.org/sdwp/international/TheChallengeofPeace.pdf>.

Read more about Bishop Walter Sullivan, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, Fr. John Dear, S.J., and other noteworthy peacemakers at <http://paxchristiusa.org/about/ambassadors-of-peace/>

