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Catholic Bishop Walter F. Sullivan dies in Richmond

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1 OF 7 PHOTOS: Retired Bishop Walter Sullivan participates in the 35th anniversary of Church of the Holy Apostles, a blended Catholic and Episcopal parish, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2012, at the church off Lynnhaven Parkway in Virginia Beach. (L. Todd Spencer | The Virginian-Pilot)

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By [Steven G. Vegh](#)
The Virginian-Pilot

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Bishop Walter F. Sullivan, a nationally recognized peace advocate who led the Catholic Diocese of Richmond for 29 years, died Tuesday in Richmond.

Sullivan, 84, died late in the afternoon at his home, according to Stephen Neill, editor of The Catholic Virginian. He had an inoperable liver tumor and had been under hospice care since being released Wednesday from St. Mary's Hospital in Richmond.

Born June 10, 1928, Sullivan took mandatory retirement at 75 in 2003. He was known as a hands-on bishop with a toothy grin who drove 30,000 miles a year visiting far-flung parishes from the rural southwest to the cities and suburbs of South Hampton Roads.

"The big word for Sullivan was 'present.' He did not rule from afar; he was on the scene, on the spot," said the Rev. Thomas Caroluzza, a retired priest who worked under Sullivan. "He'd meet with kids, teenagers, with anybody."

During his tenure, the Richmond diocese grew to 213,000 members, with much of that gain in South Hampton Roads, where he approved several new parishes.

Sullivan was the first to oversee the diocese after the Vatican revamped its boundaries in 1974 to create the new Diocese of Arlington in Northern Virginia. He became the longest-serving bishop in the Richmond diocese's 192-year history.

Sullivan grew up in Chevy Chase, Md., a middle-class Washington suburb. By 14, he was studying at a Catholic "minor" seminary that prepared teens for the priesthood.

He attended St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore and was ordained in the Richmond diocese in 1953. After serving as a parish priest in Roanoke and at Fort Monroe in Hampton, he became chancellor and aide to Richmond Bishop John J. Russell in 1965.

Sullivan was ordained a bishop in 1970 and succeeded Russell in 1974 as head of the diocese. He celebrated by throwing a party for 1,500 with soda and hot dogs in a Richmond park.

Sullivan had opposed the Vietnam War, and his status as bishop gave his peace activism national exposure as he denounced the nation's nuclear arsenal, U.S. military aid to El Salvador, the Persian Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Sullivan's anti-war stance landed him on the cover of Rolling Stone in the 1970s.

Pacifism even tinged his attempt in 1981 to ban football at parochial schools after the death of a teen injured on a parish team. Sullivan said the sport taught violence and hatred and "does not represent any Christian values that I can see."

Sullivan served for years as bishop-president of Pax Christi USA, a national Catholic peace group.

His passion for peace seemed a natural complement to his zeal for the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, where Catholic leaders made ecumenism, interfaith understanding and lay roles in the church new priorities.

"I believe in the traditional church. I'm part of it, and I'm not about to turn it upside down," he said in 2003. "But I'd like to turn our people upside down to ask, 'What does our faith mean? What does it mean to be a believer?'"

"He used to say to me when I was a seminarian, 'There's room in the Church for everybody,'" said the Rev. Michael Renninger, now a priest at St. Mary Catholic Church in Richmond.

Under Sullivan, the diocese added 24 boards representing groups including youths, women and blacks, and he consulted them regularly. Sullivan also fulfilled a Vatican II mandate by creating new parishes, at the rate of more than one a year, including St. John the Apostle in Virginia Beach and St. Stephen Martyr in Chesapeake.

His strong ecumenism was highlighted when Sullivan approved the formation of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Virginia Beach as a unique blended parish led by Catholic and Episcopal co-pastors.

His interfaith outreach included a donation of \$50,000 toward the founding of the Virginia Holocaust Museum, underscoring his warm relations with the state's Jewish community.

In 1993, he memorialized Holocaust victims with a statue, "Rachel Weeping for Her Children," on the grounds of the cathedral in Richmond.

"As we celebrate the miracle of Hanukkah, we trust the light from Bishop Sullivan will continue to guide us," said Rabbi Israel Zoberman, who leads Congregation Beth Chaverim in Virginia Beach.

From 1985 through 1995, Zoberman's congregation met at Church of the Ascension in Virginia Beach. Zoberman said that his was the only synagogue in the world to meet at a Catholic facility, and that the arrangement would not have happened without Sullivan.

"Every time Bishop spoke with us, I said, 'The pulpit is yours,'" Zoberman said. "The best interfaith can offer came from Bishop Sullivan."

In a religion with an all-male clergy, Sullivan appointed at least a half-dozen women as parish administrators - nonspiritual roles formerly the domain of priests. He also appointed a woman as his chancellor.

When the pope in 1994 reiterated his opposition to ordaining women, Sullivan published a letter in the diocese's newspaper urging the church to "change our ways of thinking and acting toward women."

Sullivan was one of two bishops who signed an open letter in 1992 contesting the Vatican's justifications for barring gays and lesbians from jobs in teaching, coaching and the military. He initiated an annual Mass for gays and lesbians in 1997 and established a sexual minorities advisory committee.

"As a bishop, he took risks to try to create an atmosphere... where all, literally all, could find their place in the Church," Renninger said.

Sullivan unambiguously extended that welcome to traditional Catholics by allowing St. Benedict Chapel in Chesapeake and St. Joseph Catholic Church in Richmond to use the old Latin Mass service, which was largely displaced by Vatican II.

"Again, he knew there were what some might call traditionalists who felt they didn't belong anymore," Renninger said.

Sullivan also always saw himself first as a priest serving the people, rather than the CEO of the diocese, said the Rev. Jim Curran, now at the Basilica of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Norfolk.

Curran recalled a day years ago when he was Sullivan's driver on a trip through rural Southwest Virginia. During lunch with some nuns, Sullivan learned of a local man with terminal cancer. Despite an itinerary packed with confirmation services, the bishop immediately went to the man's home to pray and give him Communion, Curran said.

"You could see an excitement that he could now go and be a priest and bring Jesus to this man who had inoperable brain cancer," said Curran, who was ordained by Sullivan in 2000. "This was clearly what defined Bishop Sullivan. This is what kept him going."

Sullivan's biggest challenge may have been public revelations in 2002 of sexual abuse of minors by some priests in the diocese. Initially, Sullivan's spokesman declared that the diocese had no abuse problem.

That statement cost Sullivan credibility after several victims openly disclosed their experiences. He eventually retired three priests with abusive pasts, including the two he'd privately reprimanded years before.

"It was an anxious time because I wanted to do what was right, what I considered right," Sullivan said in 2003.

Sullivan's brand of liberal Catholicism was followed by the more traditional outlook of his successor, Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo, who took charge of the diocese in 2004. That view is parallel to a conservative trend in the wider Catholic Church.

One of DiLorenzo's first acts was a directive that no one could be invited by parishes as a guest speaker without first being approved by the diocesan theologian, a post that DiLorenzo re-established.

DiLorenzo's dismantling of Sullivan's legacy included allowing fewer women to be parish administrators and declining to reactivate the diocesan sexual minorities committee.

He also dismissed from a diocesan commission a Virginia Beach woman who supported the ordination of women.

Under Sullivan, the idea of creating a new diocese in eastern Virginia was backed by the diocese's Council of Priests. Sullivan supported the initiative and sent it to the papal nuncio, the Vatican's representative in the United States. DiLorenzo disagreed, and the initiative fizzled.

This fall, the Richmond diocese told the Church of the Holy Apostles that it had to change its worship practice of more than 30 years so that Catholics and non-Catholics hold Holy Communion in separate rooms.

In a 2006 interview, Sullivan declined to assess his successor.

"He's the leader now, and I stay above the fray, you might say," Sullivan said. "I'm supportive of the bishop. He's the one who makes decisions, and I certainly don't want anyone to have the impression I'm around to undermine him."

In retirement, Sullivan continued to preach, perform confirmation ceremonies, speak around the diocese and dote on his beloved schnauzers. He traveled and retained his beach home in Sandbridge.

Virginia Commonwealth University established the Bishop Walter F. Sullivan Chair in Catholic Studies, and he was honored by the Virginia Holocaust Museum. He also served as president of the board of the Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, an independent ecumenical group that is promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Pilot writer Mike Connors contributed to this report.

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