

Former U.S. bishop Walter Sullivan dies

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(Photo: 2002 AP file photo by Lindy Keast Rodman)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Sullivan was diagnosed with liver cancer

RICHMOND, Virginia (AP) — Former Bishop Walter F. Sullivan, a progressive leader in the U.S. Roman Catholic church and the longest-serving head of the Richmond diocese, died Tuesday. He was 84.

Sullivan, who had been diagnosed with liver cancer, died at home, said Judy Lindfors, assistant editor of The Catholic Virginian.

He spent the majority of his life serving the church, including 29 years as bishop of the sprawling Richmond diocese and 21 years before that as a priest.

As the 11th bishop to head the Richmond diocese, Sullivan was known as one of the more progressive

leaders in the Catholic church. He caused controversy by opening his churches to gays and lesbians, condemning wars in Vietnam and the Middle East and speaking out against the death penalty.

Under Sullivan, women found a greater role in the church as lectors and Eucharistic ministers, and seven of the diocese's 145 parishes were run by women.

Sullivan also was instrumental in reaching out to minorities and other groups. Before he retired in 2003, the diocese had 24 advisory committees representing youth, women, homosexuals, blacks and senior citizens — all of which he consulted regularly.

The Commission on Sexual Minorities was the first official attempt by a Catholic diocese to reach out to homosexual parishioners when it was established in 1977. While it was not instantly accepted by many in the church, there were more than 40 commissions like it 20 years later.

The commission was disbanded shortly after Bishop Francis DiLorenzo took over for Sullivan in 2004.

"The word Catholic means there's room for everyone," Sullivan told The Associated Press in an interview in 2003. "We are united in our different cultures by our common faith."

Sullivan's outreach extended to other faiths, as well. He donated \$50,000 of diocesan funds to the Virginia Holocaust Museum when it was being built and sat on its board of directors.

He also helped found the Church of the Holy Apostles in Virginia Beach in 1977, a joint parish of the Catholic and Episcopal dioceses. Co-pastors conducted services at side-by-side altars — one for Catholics, the other for Episcopalians. The idea was popular among military families who came from different backgrounds and religions.

Last month, the Richmond diocese said the church could continue to longtime practice of allowing the blended church to remain under one roof, but it ordered clergy to devise a plan to meet in separate rooms for Holy Communion.

Sullivan's views reflected the liberal thinking found in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1970s, but he was criticized in the latter part of his career for moving too far away from the Vatican's central positions on church services and the priesthood.

Sullivan was a vociferous opponent of military conflicts. He said in a statement on the eve of war with Iraq in March 2003 that he deeply regretted "that our nation's leaders have determined that war is necessary to resolve our differences with Iraq." The diocesan office handed out black ribbons to protest the war.

He was also an outspoken opponent of the death penalty. In an interview with a Catholic wire service in 2000, Sullivan said, "They send people to death because it is like a trophy to be exhibited: the more killed, the better it is. Elections are won this way in the United States."

In the wake of the national sex abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic church, Sullivan was chastised by many for not admitting that the Richmond diocese had had priests accused of molesting children in the 1970s and '80s until after victims came forward. Three priests were ousted from the diocese in the wake of the national Catholic organization adopting new rules for dealing with allegations in 2002.

"As a bishop, he took risks to try to create an atmosphere in the church where all literally all could find their place in the Church," the Rev. Michael Renninger, now a priest at St. Mary Catholic Church in Richmond, told The Virginian-Pilot.

Sullivan was born in Washington, D.C., in 1928 and received his seminary education at St. Charles College and St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore.

He was ordained as a priest for the Diocese of Richmond in 1953 and received a degree in Canon law from Catholic University in 1960.

In 1970, Sullivan was ordained as auxiliary bishop for the Richmond diocese; four years later, he was installed as bishop.

Sullivan took mandatory retirement in 2003 at the age of 75.

The Diocese of Richmond is one of the oldest in the country, established in 1820 from part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The diocese is home to 220,000 Catholics, and stretches from Virginia's Eastern Shore to Cumberland Gap on the Tennessee and Kentucky borders, a distance of 535 miles (860 kilometers).

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