

Recently, I learned of the death of Bishop Walter Sullivan, retired bishop of the diocese of Richmond, Virginia.

Bishop Sullivan was a father, a shepherd, whose love extended to every person. His was a consistent Catholic ethic of respect and action on behalf of human life. Besides his unwavering advocacy on behalf of the unborn, Bishop Sullivan was a strong voice for the coal miners and their families who lived in the southwest part of his diocese, people often at the mercy of the corporate mine owners, subject to substandard wages, and consequently living in poverty lacking just wages in order to access adequate housing and medical care.

Two other pro-life actions of Bishop Sullivan stand out directly related to today’s Gospel story. Believing that if one stands for the defense of life at its inception, then one must equally uphold the dignity of human life across the spectrum of its journey, even when the outward form that life has become injured or distorted through personal choices. Bishop Sullivan was an outspoken opponent of the death penalty. Personally he led or joined in prayer vigils outside the state penitentiary in Richmond at the time of the execution of an inmate. For Bishop Sullivan, no human being was considered or judged as “lost to salvation”. God’s forgiveness and the possibility of reconciliation and rehabilitation, of restored life, were always possible and society had an obligation to use non-violent means to allow for such conversion even as at the same time it protected itself from those who have done it harm.

Secondly, is the example Bishop Sullivan showed in regard to Father Ron, one of his own priests. In early 1990, Father Ron, on his own initiative, informed the bishop that medical tests had shown that he was HIV positive and had developed AIDS. At that time medical science had no viable therapies for the disease. AIDS sufferers were treated a “lepers”, physically and morally. They were often shunned by medical professionals, as well as their families and friends.

Learning of Father Ron's condition Bishop Sullivan invited him to take up residence with him in the Cathedral rectory. In a statement to the priests and people of the Richmond Diocese, Bishop Sullivan stated, "Father Ron has my full support as a brother priest who has served the diocese with dedication. I ask for your understanding and caring. Father Ron will receive the best medical care as well as spiritual support as he lives each day at a time. May God and we be with him each step of his earthly journey." For the next two years Father Ron lived with the bishop. On April 23, 1992 Father Ron died at age 44. As a seminarian, the future Father Ron lived in the room next to mine at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore.

In the Gospel story we see God personified in the person of the father. The father lives an unconditional love for each of his sons, a love that accepts the gift of freedom, even if one chooses to reject it and walk away from him; a love that even when one is away, does not stop, but is always on the lookout for the wanderer; a love that searches the lost out; a love that reaches out and enfolds in welcoming arms; a love that appeals to the ones who have not strayed to rejoice in the return of the lost and rejoice in their having always had the unconditional love of the father; a love that rejoices that all his children, the ones who stayed and the ones who strayed, are one with him at his table.

Bishop Sullivan shared generously the divine gifts of compassion and hospitality. What gifts has God entrusted to each of us? Last weekend we received information on the many opportunities available for sharing our time and talent here at St. Cecilia. This weekend we are hosting a ministry fair in the Social Hall where we can learn more about these opportunities. Please take some time to stop by after Mass. Next weekend we will all be invited to return our personal commitment card and offer it along with the bread and wine to be consecrated into the Body and Blood of Christ.

St. Paul reminds us that we are "ambassadors of Christ"—making flesh his person and work into our homes, parish, and community. Bishop Sullivan was such an ambassador. Today we are given this mission as well.