News

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Thomas J. Quigley, who worked for 45 years in service to the U.S. bishops, mostly in the realm of foreign policy, died Dec. 11 at age 91. He was in hospice care in Arlington, Virginia.

Funeral arrangements were pending.

Quigley was hired in 1962 when what is now known as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was still known as the National Catholic Welfare Conference.

When he accepted a buyout in 2007 along with dozens of other employees as part of a restructuring of the bishops' conference, no one at the USCCB held a tenure longer than his 45 years there.

Regarded as a key voice on Latin American affairs, Quigley was with St. Oscar Romero the day before the Salvadoran archbishop was martyred on March 24, 1980, while celebrating Mass. He first met the prelate in 1977 and they wouldn't meet again until March 23, 1980.

"Five of us from the U.S. churches had gone on a hastily formed ecumenical visit to El Salvador, seeking to express the solidarity of the U.S. religious community with him and the people of his country and to learn what we could of the current, rapidly changing situation," Quigley wrote in September 1980.

Quigley recalled the U.S. delegation attending Mass at Basilica of the Sacred Heart.

As the archbishop, priests and seminarians processed in, "the applause was thunderous, shaking the (basilica's) corrugated roof, teasing tears out of the most nonliturgical of our company," Quigley recalled. "It was simply a pastor receiving the loving embrace of a people who saw themselves, their suffering and their hopes, embodied in this humble figure.

"It didn't occur to me then, but it has often since, that that day, the eve of his martyrdom, was as vivid a re-creation as I could imagine of the palm-strewn path into Jerusalem."

Quigley was the author of the introduction to the English translation of the saint's diaries written when he was archbishop of San Salvador.

"He served the (bishops') conference for decades and made a real difference. The world and church are better for Tom's faithful, principled, consistent, persistent leadership," said John Carr, who served for many years as Quigley's boss as director of what was then known as the Office of Social Development and World Peace at the U.S. bishops' conference.

"He was a historic figure in the (bishops') conference and the relationship between the church in the U.S. and the church in Latin America," Carr said in a Dec. 12 email to Catholic News Service. "He has a powerful legacy of working for justice and peace for decades. Latin America is more just and more peaceful because of his quiet and

courageous service."

Frank Butler, retired head of FADICA, Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, told CNS Dec. 14 that Quigley was "one of the most informed and influential social justice advocates in the church of the U.S. in the last half century."

"Tom was unsurpassed in his wisdom and insight on Latin America. He played a huge role in linking the church in this country with the struggles of fellow Christians there," Butler said. "His goodness, intelligence and deep devotion to his faith account for the inspiring impact Tom Quigley had on those with whom he labored."

Born July 18, 1930, Quigley hailed from Geneva, New York, and at one point had studied to become a Maryknoll priest.

When he came to work for the bishops in Washington, one of his early assignments was to oversee the national office of Papal Volunteers, a Peace Corps-like program inspired by St. John XXIII.

The organization was launched in 1961 as a lay Catholic response to the pope's missionary call and focused on sending volunteers to Latin America. It was disbanded in 1971, although some dioceses continued sending volunteers until 1975.

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Although Quigley may be best known for his insights on Latin American affairs, in the decade before his retirement, he switched gears and became a policy adviser also on Asian affairs and Caribbean issues.

In 1999, Quigley, visited Vietnam with a U.S. bishops' delegation before making a side trip to East Timor, then a restive province of Indonesia. He called the East Timor trip, days after the vote on independence from Indonesia, a "visit of solidarity" to show support for the church there.

Quigley stayed in the residence of Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo of Dili, the provincial capital, attended the bishop's outdoor Mass there the next morning and flew out of East Timor in the afternoon. A day after that, pro-Indonesia militias attacked and burned Bishop Belo's residence.

His appearances at congressional hearings were a staple of Capitol Hill. In 1977, for example, he testified on the condition of human rights in El Salvador, "with particular reference to the persecution of the church."

In 2001, he testified before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus that the church in Vietnam was "limited" but not persecuted.

There could be "no denying that religious freedom is severely limited in today's Vietnam," he said, but he also remarked that it must be noted the government's relations with churches had improved, especially in the case of the Catholic Church.

Quigley's voice, hewn by decades of experience, carried gravitas matched by few in either government or religious circles.

In 1989, as Panama's Manuel Noriega was asserting autocratic rule in the country, Quigley said the U.S. bishops would adhere to the Panamanian bishops' request and not ask the U.S. government to intervene militarily — although President George H.W. Bush ultimately sent U.S. forces into Panama to drive Noriega out.

Unilateral U.S. military interference in Panama had been "ruled out" by the Panamanian bishops, he noted. Such action would cancel "goodwill" that developed between the two nations as a result of the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties, which allowed Panama to gradually take control of the canal.

In 1994, Quigley was one of 3,000 observers of the election in El Salvador. He reported "the constant problem that people came up to me and said 'I can't find my name on the (voter) list.'"

In 1999, he visited El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua with several U.S. bishops to assess the damage wrought by Hurricane Mitch.

In 2006, he was at the meeting of the Colombian bishops' conference, after which he said the bishops were resigned to President Hugo Chavez staying in power and were seeking to build bridges with him.

Even in retirement, he brought his decades of experience to bear on relevant foreign policy issues.

During a 2013 panel on Cuba sponsored by the Brookings Institution, Quigley recalled that soon after Fidel Castro's revolutionaries took power in 1959, religious schools were closed and church property was taken over by the state.

Many priests and women religious were expelled and many others left on their own, he said, while those involved in the church — any church — were subjected to discrimination at best and sometimes harassment and detention.

Quigley said the transition from Fidel Castro's rule to that of his brother, Raul, was one factor in more dramatic changes for the church. "It has been Raul who has helped to bring the Catholic Church at least partway in from the cold," he said.

"For decades, Tom Quigley persistently and faithfully has stood with the church and people of Latin America. Tom shared his unparalleled knowledge, built enduring bridges and worked constantly for justice and peace in a region marked by injustice and conflict," said Carr, now co-director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University in Washington.

"In quiet and humble ways, Tom shared the witness and vision of Oscar Romero with the church in the United States more than anyone. He helped bishops, policymakers and the rest of us to listen and learn the lessons from a church in Latin America struggling to hear and stand with the poor and oppressed. Tom's knowledge, advocacy and passion for the poor are examples of lay leadership and service to the church at their best," Carr added.