

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 18, 2008 at 9:39am

Legacy of a Vatican II bishop: Civil rights, peace and the care of the poor were his passion

by Chaz Muth by Catholic News Service

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WASHINGTON -- Retired Bishop Charles A. Buswell of Pueblo, Colo., who had been one of four remaining U.S. bishops to have attended all four sessions of the Second Vatican Council, died June 14 at the age of 94.

A funeral Mass was to be celebrated for Buswell June 19 at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Pueblo, followed by interment in the bishops mausoleum in Pueblo's Roselawn Cemetery.

An anti-war protester into his 90s, the Oklahoma native, who had been in poor health for the past couple of years, died peacefully in his Pueblo retirement home, said Deacon Jake Arellano, assistant to Bishop Arthur N. Tafoya, the current head of the Pueblo Diocese.

During his 1959-79 tenure as bishop of Pueblo, Buswell was outspoken on civil rights causes and backed the rights of conscientious objectors.

Buswell started a program known as the Ministry of Christian Service that allowed lay people to study theology and then assist in pastoral programs. He also encouraged diocesan and parish officials to seek out and invite women and minorities to participate in church life.

Remaining active after his 1979 retirement, he was arrested during his participation in anti-nuclear protests, was an outspoken opponent of anti-gay measures in Colorado and joined Pax Christi USA in many of its humanitarian efforts, which included urging President Bill Clinton to press for Palestinian human rights in 1999.

As a champion for an expanded role for women in the church, Buswell signed on early to the nine-year effort to produce a U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on women's concerns in the church and society. The pastoral was rejected by the bishops in 1992. Instead, they decided to issue the document as a report of the ad hoc committee that wrote it.

"Women should be called to equality in the church," Buswell once said. "The church is universal. We have to work at this equality. We are far too late in coming to the understanding of women in the church."

In 1993 he joined three other U.S. bishops in sending an open letter to Pope John Paul II asking that he "condemn bigotry and discrimination against gay and lesbian persons as contrary to the spirit of Jesus and the Gospel" when he traveled to Denver for World Youth Day that year. No reaction to the letter was issued by the Vatican, nor did the pope issue such a condemnation.

That year there were calls for a national boycott of Colorado's tourist and convention facilities to protest the state's ban on gay rights measures.

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"He was a big advocate of peace," Arellano said. "Civil rights, peace and the care of the poor were his passion."

In 1994, he was honored as a "co-member" of the Sisters of Loretto, a group of sisters at the cutting edge of reform in religious women's life. He had been a close friend of Loretine Sister Mary Luke Tobin, one of only two American women to have been official observers at Vatican II, and a pioneer of reforms in religious life. She died in August 2006.

Born Oct. 15, 1913, in Homestead, Okla., Buswell was ordained a priest for what was then the Diocese of Oklahoma City-Tulsa in 1939. (The Oklahoma City Archdiocese was created in 1972 and the Diocese of Tulsa in 1973.)

He was appointed bishop of Pueblo by Pope John XXIII in 1959.

With Buswell's death, the three remaining U.S. bishops, all now retired, to have attended all four sessions of Vatican II are: Archbishop Philip M. Hannan, head of the New Orleans Archdiocese from 1965 until his retirement in 1988; Archbishop Raymond G. Hunthausen, archbishop of Seattle from 1975 until his 1991 retirement; and Archbishop Francis M. Zayek, head of the Maronite Eparchy of St. Maron of Brooklyn, N.Y., from 1972 to 1996.

At the time of his death, Buswell was the fifth-oldest living U.S. Catholic bishop. The following retired bishops are the top four oldest in the U.S.: Archbishop Peter L. Gerety of Newark, N.J., 95; Auxiliary Bishop Bernard J. McLaughlin of Buffalo, N.Y., 95; Archbishop William D. Borders of Baltimore, 94; and Archbishop Hannan, 94.

"One of the things I saw in Buswell was that he was a gentleman," Tafoya said in a prepared statement June 16. "Whether you agreed with him or not, or he didn't agree with you, Buswell was always gentle with people. He had that charm."

Though gentle in nature, Buswell was a fierce defender of human dignity, Tafoya said. "He was one who unfailingly demonstrated his strength of character through the power of kindness."

(NCR staff writer Dennis Coday contributed to this report.)

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