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Matthiesen, antinuclear activist-bishop, dies at 88

by NCR Staff



Bishop Leroy T. Matthiesen (photo courtesy Pax Christi USA)

Leroy T. Matthiesen, the retired bishop of Amarillo, Texas, who in the 1980s counseled Catholics to leave their jobs in a local factory that assembled nuclear weapons, died March 22. He was 88.

Matthiesen received the Teacher of Peace Award last year from Pax Christi USA, the Catholic peace group, for his 30-year opposition to nuclear arms.

At a time when the nation's Catholic bishops were preparing "The Challenge of Peace," their 1983 document on the immorality of nuclear war, Matthiesen emerged as one of the nation's most outspoken opponents of the nuclear arms buildup.

Matthiesen grew up on a cotton farm in Central West Texas. He was ordained a priest in 1946 for the Amarillo diocese, where he served his whole life as pastor, high school principal, newspaper editor and then bishop.

A local Catholic, Patrick Swindell, told the Amarillo Globe-News that the late bishop "was very spiritual,

he was very intellectual, and he was a very kind heart." Matthiesen's public prayers never failed to touch listeners, he said. "They were words spoken from his heart. ? Whatever the occasion was, they were appropriate and they were moving."

Matthiesen retired at age 75 in 1997, giving his attention to gardening, writing books and serving as spiritual advisor to a group of contemplative nuns.

He caused a stir in 2004 when it became public that he had he sent out a letter to a small group of people seeking to raise funds for the support of three Amarillo priests who had been removed from ministry because of allegations of sexual abuse of minors. He said he took the personal initiative as a friend of the priests.

In March 2002, Matthiesen presided at a Mass in a Louisville, Ky., conference center to mark the 25th anniversary of New Ways Ministry, despite a Vatican directive denying permission to celebrate Mass. Matthiesen told Catholic News Service that the group, which ministers to gay and lesbian Catholics, "asked me if I would celebrate the Eucharist and I said sure."

He said neither the Vatican nor the local archbishop had instructed him not to celebrate Mass for the group, and in fact he had not been in contact with either.

"I guess I just asked what would Jesus do, and the answer seemed to be obvious," he said. Despite the Vatican's concerns about the meeting, he said, "the whole experience was wonderful."

Matthiesen planned to attend the New Ways Ministry conference in 2007 in Minneapolis and again celebrate Mass with attendees, but he did not. He said then that he was reluctantly honoring a request from "Catholic authorities" to stay away from the conference. He said he couldn't reveal exactly who made the request.

A funeral Mass is scheduled for March 27 at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Amarillo with Bishop Patrick J. Zurek of Amarillo presiding. The bishop will be buried in a family cemetery plot at St. Boniface Church in Olfen, south of Abilene.

Advertisement

Bishop Matthiesen, retired head of Amarillo Diocese, dead at 88

By Catholic News Service

AMARILLO, Texas (CNS) -- Retired Bishop Leroy T. Matthiesen of Amarillo, a longtime Catholic newspaper editor and well-known social justice advocate, died after a brief illness March 22 at his home in Amarillo. He was 88.

Bishop Patrick J. Zurek of Amarillo was to celebrate his funeral Mass March 27 at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Amarillo, with burial to follow in a family cemetery plot at St. Boniface Church in Olfen, south of Abilene.

During his 17 years as bishop of Amarillo, Bishop Matthiesen was outspoken on a wide range of social justice issues, including the death penalty, nuclear disarmament, conscientious objection, racial justice, the neutron bomb and just war. He received the Ketteler Award for Social Justice in 2002 and Pax Christi USA's Teacher of Peace Award in 2009.

"We have lost one of the great voices in the movement to rid the world of nuclear weapons," said Dave Robinson, executive director of Pax Christi USA, in a March 24 statement. "He was a great man, rooted in the belief that it was the responsibility of people of faith and conscience to change the world in which we live."

Born June 11, 1921, in Olfen, Leroy Theodore Matthiesen was the fourth of eight children of Joseph Anthony and Rose Englert Matthiesen. He grew up on a cotton farm and attended local schools until going to the Pontifical College Josephinum in Worthington, Ohio, where he completed high school, four years of college and four years of graduate study in theology.

He was ordained a priest of the Amarillo Diocese at the Ohio school on March 10, 1946, by Archbishop Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, then the apostolic delegate to the United States, who later became a cardinal and Vatican secretary of state.

After ordination he served briefly as chaplain at St. John's Hospital in San Angelo, then in the Diocese of Amarillo. In June of 1946 he was sent to study at the Register College of Journalism in Denver, where he earned a master's degree and later a doctorate in journalism.

On his return to Amarillo, he was named editor of the Texas Panhandle edition of the Register system of newspapers (now *The West Texas Catholic*) and assistant pastor of Sacred Heart Cathedral. He began writing a column, "Wise and Otherwise," in the paper in 1952 and continued it until 1998.

In 1954 he was named a monsignor and became founding pastor of St. Lawrence Parish in Amarillo, while continuing as editor of the diocesan newspaper and as vocations director. In 1961 he received a master's degree in secondary school administration and was appointed the following year as rector of St. Lucian's Preparatory Seminary in Amarillo.

In 1968, still serving as editor and vocation director, Msgr. Matthiesen was named principal of Alamo Catholic High School in Amarillo and chaplain of St. Francis Convent in Amarillo. In 1971, he became, in addition, pastor of St. Francis Parish outside of Amarillo.

Following the death of Amarillo Bishop Lawrence M. DeFalco, he was elected administrator of the diocese in 1979 and served in that capacity until May 30, 1980, when he was ordained bishop of Amarillo.

A longtime member of the Catholic Press Association, Bishop Matthiesen received the CPA's Bishop Arthur J. O'Neill Award in 1996. He served on the U.S. bishops' communications committee from 1980 to 1983; on the board of directors of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, 1985-88; and on the bishops' Administrative Board, 1989-95.

One of the bishop's most controversial actions was his call in 1981 to Catholics working at the Pantex plant in his diocese, where most U.S. nuclear weapons were assembled at the time, to reconsider whether in conscience they could justify the work they were doing.

"For 33 years I lived and continue to live at the very portals of Pantex, and for those 33 years I did nothing either as a priest or a bishop until a Catholic employee and his wife came to me with troubled consciences. They had begun to think that what he was doing was wrong," Bishop Matthiesen said in a 1981 talk.

"I finally was moved to speak," he added. "I had come to the realization, with [the Rev.] Martin Luther King Jr., that the choice really is between nonviolence and nonexistence. I finally could no longer say, 'I

didn't know the gun was loaded."

At least one Pantex worker quit his job after the bishop's call, saying that nuclear proliferation was contrary to Christ's teaching.

"Man does not have the right to destroy all that God gave us," said Eloy Ramos, a father of four. "I feel honored to be the first to quit" over the nuclear arms issue.

Bishop Matthiesen retired as bishop of Amarillo on Jan. 21, 1997. In retirement he served as chaplain of the Capuchin Poor Clare Sisters and on the board of director of Ascension Academy, St. Ann's Nursing Home and the Catholic Historical Society.

He was the author of *Wise and Otherwise: The Life and Times of a Cottonpicking Texas Bishop*, published in 2004; *The Golden Years: The History of St. Laurence Cathedral in Amarillo*, published in 2005; and *Lieber Bernard and Elise: The Lives and Times of a German Texas Family*, published in 2009.

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