

Blast From the Past: Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle

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This week, and following on our coverage of the ordination of Bishop David O'Connell, Blast From the Past will look at instances when American bishops were really doing something heroic.

Our first example comes from a biography of Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle, "Steadfast in the Faith," by Morris J. MacCregor. O'Boyle came to Washington, D.C. as its first residential archbishop in 1948 when the nation's capital was still living under Jim Crow segregation. O'Boyle set about desegregating the Catholic schools, before the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case ordered the desegregation of the public school. O'Boyle started with the colleges and universities, then the high schools, and finally the parochial elementary schools. He ran into especially stiff opposition in Southern Maryland, where he was unable to affect desegregation until the mid-50s and the following episode illustrates how he dealt with the opposition.

Numerous groups insisted on presenting their arguments to the archbishop personally, and O'Boyle readily agreed to such meetings. The most noted of these occurred in August 1956, when a large delegation representing the major parishes of St. Mary's County came to St. Patrick's [where O'Boyle lived] for a discussion that lasted seven hours. Far from the raucous crowd that had confronted Father McKenna in 1951, this group included some of the most distinguished and thoughtful Catholics from the region. O'Boyle patiently answered their questions and debated their opinions. Recognizing the sincerity of their views and the depth of their feelings, he even arranged an impromptu lunch for the group. In the end they pleaded that he postpone any changes in their schools until the state ordered integration in the public schools. To those who claimed that the area would not be ready for integration for at least a decade, O'Boyle replied, "Well, gentlemen, we're going to do it tomorrow." The delegation took its leave knowing it had failed. Yet up to the last minute, O'Boyle was not at all sure of how the vast majority of Catholics in the region would react. On September 5, just days before schools were scheduled to open, he privately warned his priests that "because of certain circumstances in Southern Maryland," the archdiocese might well need to support many of the schools in the area.

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