

William J. Sullivan, S.J.: 1930-2015

- *Memorial Mass*
- *June 26, 2015*
- *St. James Cathedral*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

How do we place Fr. Bill Sullivan in this Memorial Mass which celebrates his life and proclaims his resurrection beyond death in Jesus Christ? Perhaps the best way to frame him is with the prayer, written by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. This prayer which is printed on his memorial card, is one Fr. Sullivan prayed perhaps more than any other, for it is almost like the Jesuit's "Our Father," an offering of one's life to God, asking the Father to "take", i.e. "Suscipe" in Latin, all one has been given.

Take, Lord, and receive
all my liberty,
my memory,
my understanding,
and my entire will,
all I have and call my own.
You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours;
do with it what you will.
Give me only
your love and your grace,
that is enough for me.

What did Bill Sullivan ask from God; what was he given; and how did he use it in return to God?

Let us place him first of all with Solomon to whom God says, "Whatever you ask I shall give you." Solomon tells God that he has been put in charge of so vast a people that what he most needs is the wisdom to govern them. God replies to Solomon: "I give you a heart so wise and discerning that there has never been anyone like you until now, nor after you will there be anyone to equal you." There is the great gift of God to Bill Sullivan: an extraordinary intelligence to govern and to lead boldly, courageously. There are many kinds of intelligence: philosophical, poetic, practical, intuitive, scientific, mathematical, emotional. Bill was given the intelligence of governance, to know how to lead, to see what was the right way, to be courageous and forthright in stepping forward, to win others to a great cause. He is unparalleled in my experience in this gift.

Bill seemed to have this gift from God from early in his life and to use it always. At Campion High School he was Captain of the Guard of the other cadet students...and all his life he remained a "captain!" He manifested this gift at St. Louis University as Dean of the School of Divinity in welcoming a breakaway group of Lutherans...and he got fired for his boldness. He manifested this same intelligence of governance in righting the financial ship of Seattle

University, building its modern campus, leading two capital campaigns, buying a Law School, founding the School of Theology and Ministry, chairing the Organizing Committee of the Goodwill Games, steering The Hutch in developing its policy of patient protection, changing the name across America from “private” universities to “independent” universities, because he insisted they served a public good. It is not enough to say he was bright...he had a brilliant gift to lead forthrightly. St. Ignatius in his prayer offers to God all his “liberty, memory, understanding, and entire will”. Bill had these in abundance, especially that understanding and will—I stress the latter—and he gave them fully in return to God in service of others in great causes.

The prayer of St. Ignatius says, “Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me.” In Bill Sullivan this love and grace was experienced in a very deep, almost mystical sense, in Jesus Christ as the center of all reality transforming the world into God’s Kingdom. As we read today:

[Christ Jesus] is...the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things...all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together...For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things...”

Following the pioneering French theologians with whom he studied, and especially the theology of his beloved Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Bill believed that Christ dwelt at the very heart of the world, of all reality, and was transforming the world in the same way we believe we transform bread and wine in the Mass into the very person, body and soul, of Christ. Fr. Sullivan loved to tell new students of Matteo Ricci College of what he called “The Mass On the World.” I’m sure they did not fully understand it; but he lived it. He had a spirituality of not being afraid to reach out as priest, and Christian, and Jesuit president to the world, to culture, to all men and women, for there he believed was to be found Christ transforming the world. He was no sanctuary priest; but a priest for the world and for so many people who would not otherwise meet or know a priest. His spirituality of Christ at the center of all things took him out of his Jesuit community, off his university campus, outside of churches to the biggest issues and the widest array of people. Indeed, he returned God’s gift of love and grace by being a priest for the world.

Finally the prayer of St. Ignatius says, “Everything is yours [Lord], do with it what you will...that is enough for me.” Or as our gospel says, “I pray for [my disciples]...so that they may share my joy completely...I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth.”

What was the joy of our friend, Bill Sullivan? We found it in his mirth, in his Irish pluck, in the twinkle in his eye. His full joy came forward especially in his adoration of his mother and his devotion to his sister, Kathleen. He shared his joy by ignoring nearly every traffic regulation—they were made for others—as well as most regulations of the Catholic Church about weddings and baptisms. He would not be constrained by liturgists or archbishops! His joy came both in getting in shape to climb to the base camp of Mt. Everest and in going into the kitchen in our Jesuit community after a long day of work to prepare for himself what we Jesuits called a “Mount Rainier”, ice cream heaped above the rim of the bowl with chocolate sauce running

down its crevices! He found joy in a sailing race across the Pacific—Captain Bill of old—or on a university picnic at the volleyball net spiking the ball down upon an unexpected delicate staff member. His joy was complete with the members of the Pigott, the Bannan, the Wright, and the Lee families—as well as other families—at their Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners, having come at times the same day from celebrating Mass for people in prison. How great was his joy in escaping Milwaukee winters by spending months in Hawaii with Helen Jolly and her family! His joy was complete in the couples he married, in making it possible for former basketball players to graduate from Seattle U, in providing an education for someone he met on the street, and above all in the lives of his beloved Sullivan Scholars & Leaders. Bill led a very big life, he was created and gifted to do so, but he also led a very small life in quiet, personal, loving care of others. He found joy in both.

St. Ignatius prays, “This is enough for me.” Was it for Bill? Not really, and yet at the very end, yes. Laid low by a stroke, he found the last nineteen years of his life couped up in a Jesuit Community extremely hard. No one found being sidelined from being the “Captain” of great enterprises, more difficult than did Bill. Those were years not of joy, but of unhappy helplessness. But then—by God’s grace—somehow in the very last four days of his life something turned in him. Those around him in the Jesuit care center in Wisconsin could only describe this change by saying he became “jovial.” His religious superior told me; “Bill Sullivan died at peace with others, at peace with himself, and at peace with God.” So in the very end, after returning to God his extraordinary intelligence of governance and leadership, his life of service as a priest for the world, and all of his joy especially in family and friends, he said by how he died “give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me.” That is a good place to entrust him as well as ourselves.