

For Immediate Release: Saturday, August 19, 2023

Bishop Emeritus Howard J. Hubbard Dies

Howard J. Hubbard, the street priest who became the youngest bishop in America at the time and the longest serving in the history of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany, died Saturday, August 19, 2023, as a result of a stroke. He was 84 years old.

For 50 years, Hubbard was a leader of the liberal wing of the American Catholic Church and a leading voice in public life in New York, an activist and outspoken advocate for peace and social justice, respect for life, care for the poor and marginalized, and friendship with other faiths, particularly the Jewish community. He was humble and witty but fearless in the face of controversy and, while deeply respectful of church teaching and tradition, profoundly independent in his thinking. He publicly advocated for the ordination of women as priests while Rome opposed it. He sued the state to stop the opening of abortion clinics. He led efforts to abolish the death penalty in New York and chaired New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty. He worked to reform New York's drug laws and supported farm workers and prison reform. To slow the spread of AIDS, he supported providing free syringes to drug users. He was an early advocate for providing material help and spiritual support for mothers and babies addicted to AIDS. As early as 1966, he urged white Catholics to confront racism and apologize to blacks. Later, he called on Catholics to acknowledge the official church's antisemitism and led a historic Palm Sunday reconciliation service between Christians and Jews.

But for the most part his days and evenings were happily devoted to shepherding the 400,000 or so Catholics of his Diocese. He was tireless in his ministry, confirming thousands of young Catholics each year, celebrating Mass for inmates in prisons and elderly people at senior living facilities, presiding at ordinations, graduations, and anniversaries and officiating at funerals; encouraging the hard work of priests, sisters, deacons and religious communities, and visiting local churches in happy moments of expansion and heartbreaking times of parish consolidation and closure, including that of his own home parish, St. Patrick's in Troy. He wore out cars driving across the 14 counties of the sprawling Diocese. He was among the first bishops to harness the power of television, conducting a primetime television retreat from the studios of local television stations. He typically took one night off a week to have dinner with his family and do his laundry at his mother's home. He loved Italian food, the Boston Red Sox and Cape Cod. He was a devoted listener to ESPN radio and a voracious consumer of news.

As a priest, one of his first assignments was in the south end of Albany where he came face to face with the poverty, drug and alcohol problems that were ravaging the community. At first, he took direct action – helping alcoholics and drug addicts get to hospitals, collecting food for families in need, and helping people without homes find apartments they could afford. He became known as Albany's "street priest." In 1966, he founded Providence House, a crisis intervention center, and Hope House, a drug rehabilitation center, and served as the chair of the Hope House board until earlier this year.

Early on, his relationship with Albany's political and law enforcement leadership was rocky; he was seen as a radical. Over time, he developed a friendship with the late Albany Mayor Erastus Corning 2nd – one of many close friendships with powerful political and community leaders -- and a strong working relationship with law enforcement, other religious leaders and the social services and health care communities.

He served as the founding president of LIVCORP, a program providing group homes for those with developmental disabilities, and was a member of the Albany Mental Health Association and president of the Albany Urban League. He chaired the public policy committee of the New York State Catholic Conference for the entirety of his career. He served as chair of the Diocese's Priest Personnel Board, Director of the Office of Pastoral Planning, was a member of the Commission for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

Hubbard gained a national reputation as an effective leader and advocate and was elected by his peers, the Bishops of the United States, to chair the the U.S. Catholic Conference Committees on Marriage and Family Life, Human Values, The Catholic Campaign for Human Development and the International Committee for Justice and Peace. He served for 18 years on the Administrative Committee of the U.S. Bishops Conference. In 1983, Pope John Paul II appointed him to the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Believers.

Over the course of his episcopacy, he wrote two pastoral letters to the people of his Diocese — “We are His People” and “We are God's Priestly People” -- and two books and co-authored a third with his longtime friend, the late Rochester Bishop Matthew Clark, a native of Waterford, N.Y. He served as Episcopal Liaison to the Catholic AIDS Network and the National Council for Pastoral Planning and Council Development.

In his final years as bishop, allegations were made that he had covered up sexual abuse by priests. He acknowledged that he had followed the mainstream church practice of referring offending priests for psychological treatment and returning them to ministry only when licensed health care professionals determined it was safe to do so. He had long believed in the promise of rehabilitation and redemption but publicly acknowledged in retrospect that the policy was a mistake. He repeatedly apologized to anyone who suffered as a result of his actions.

After a lifetime of serving families and children in need, he was devastated when allegations were made that he himself had sexually abused minors. He steadfastly denied having ever abused any person of any age at any time, and no court ever adjudged him guilty or liable. When those allegations first arose in 2004, an exhaustive investigation of 40 years of his life conducted by former U.S. Attorney Mary Jo White cleared him.

Hubbard recognized that the allegations against him, while false, would taint his reputation forever. He said: “While the pain that I have felt as an individual falsely accused is great, it can never approach the devastation experienced by victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy or others in a position of authority in our society.”

Hubbard was born at Samaritan Hospital in Troy on October 31, 1938, and grew up in Lansingburgh. He attended Haskell School, St. Patrick's School, and LaSalle Institute in Troy. In

1956, he began his formation for the priesthood at Mater Christi Seminary in Albany and completed his bachelor's degree at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers. He was then assigned the North American College in Rome and the Gregorian University from which he earned a licentiate in Sacred Theology.

He was ordained in Rome at the Church of St. Ignatius on December 18, 1963, at the height the Second Vatican Council. The first-in-a-century gathering was called to redefine the church's role in modern society. As a result, the Catholic Church globally opened its windows onto the modern world and became more inclusive, started a dialogue with other religions, updated the liturgy and approved the use of languages other than Latin to be used during Mass, and gave a larger role to lay people – all reforms Hubbard eagerly embraced and brought back to the Albany Diocese.

In 1976, only 13 years after ordination, he was appointed to the post of Albany Diocese vicar general, the Bishop's most senior deputy. Late one night the next year, returning to his room after a long day of ministering in the community, Hubbard discovered a telegram from Pope Paul VI informing him that the Pope was considering appointing him Bishop. He had 24 hours to consider the request. He accepted and on February 2, 1977, the Pope appointed Hubbard the ninth bishop of the Diocese of Albany, the first Bishop native to the Albany Diocese. He received his episcopal consecration in a ceremony at Siena College on March 27, 1977. He was 38 and the youngest bishop in America at the time. He served as Bishop for 37 years until the mandatory age of retirement of 75, stepping down in 2014.

In 2013, summing up his priestly career, Hubbard said: "I tried to be a disciple of Jesus and a compassionate shepherd. I didn't always succeed, but I tried my best."

Like other Bishops, Hubbard had struggled with the historic shortage of priests during his years in office. In retirement, he had hoped to continue to serve as a priest, helping out at parishes on weekends and when other priests were away. But when the abuse allegations were made against him, he had placed himself on voluntary leave, consistent with a policy that he had implemented as Bishop. He refrained from appearing in public as a priest and from any public ministry and largely disappeared from public view, avoiding even the Siena basketball games he loved to attend.

Last year, he asked the Vatican to allow him to leave the priesthood, return to the lay state and be relieved of the obligations of celibacy. The request was denied. In July, Hubbard announced that he had met a wonderful woman who supported him and believed in him, and that they had decided to marry in a civil ceremony. He and his wife Jennifer (Barrie) Hubbard were married just three weeks.

Hubbard was the son of Howard Hubbard and Elizabeth Burke, the brother of the late Joan Engelman (Richard) and the late Kathleen Kawola (Constantine). He was the uncle of 13 nieces and nephews: the six children of his sister Kathleen: Michael Kawola , Thomas Kawola (Sue), Matthew Kawola (Jackie), Nancy Keeler (Bill), Lynn Fitzgerald (Steve) and Carol (Scott) as well as the seven children of his sister Joan: Susan Gibson (Mark), Kathleen Gulla (Bob), Richard Engelman, Jr.,(Elizabeth) David Engelman, Kevin Engelman, Karen Sprague (Galen) and

Christopher Engelman. Hubbard also was the grand uncle of 32 nieces and nephews and the great great grand uncle of 12 nieces and nephews. He was the cherished nephew of Loretta Burke.

In addition to prayers for him, Hubbard asked that any bequests be made to the Priest Retirement Fund of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany or to the charity of one's choice.

Funeral arrangements, to be handled by the McVeigh Funeral Home in Albany, are pending.

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