

Fr. Bernard J. Boff, ordained a priest for the Diocese of Toledo in 1961, completed his life of dedicated service on August 8, 2013. Bernie Boff, who was a seminary classmate of mine and a good friend for over 50 years, asked me to preach at his funeral with the understanding that he wanted a scripture-based homily and not a eulogy. In preparation, I talked about Bernie with many people, including his friends, relatives, parishioners and fellow priests. Much of what I heard was filtered through my own perception of my friend as a man who embraced the cross of Christ wherever it appeared in his life. He was a cross-bearer, a man with a cruciform heart, a priest with a paschal imagination. For me, this is the key to understanding and appreciating his deep interior life and his remarkably broad vision of priestly ministry.

With this interpretive key in mind, I began my homily with one of Bernie's favorite passages from John's Gospel, 12: 23-26, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." For John, "the hour" is the hour of Christ's death on the cross, which paradoxically led to his glorified risen life. Jesus was obedient to the will of his Father even to the point of death, death on a cross, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Philippians. Christ insisted that his disciples must take up their cross daily in order to follow him.

This is not a popular message in our society today. Despite progress, there are still strong death-denying tendencies in our culture. Talk of suffering and the cross are deemed life-denying. The gospel of prosperity proclaims that virtuous Christians are blessed with the good life that bypasses the cross. In our post-Vatican II Catholic world, we have properly stressed the positive life-giving message of the Gospel, but for some this has meant playing down the cross and distorting the relationship between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Personally, we all know the temptation to shirk the cross, to opt for expediency over principle, and to take the easy way out. An honest self-examination may reveal some questionable tendencies: to carry hidden resentments that our crosses are heavier than others; to harbor silent protests that God has unfairly burdened us; or to think of those bearing heavy crosses as sinful people punished by God.

To gain a more balanced perspective on the cross, we turn back to John's Gospel where Jesus offers a simple image for our reflection: only if the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies will it bear abundant fruit. Jesus was not a masochist seeking suffering for its own sake. He was totally committed to the cause of God, and that brought him to the cross. Self-sacrificing love was the hallmark of his whole life, as he bore heavy crosses: the misunderstanding of his family; the density and cowardice of his disciples; the rejection of the religious leaders; and the arrogant power of the Roman empire.

The hour of the death of Jesus was the hour of his glorification. His complete self-emptying surrender to Abba opened him to the total fulfillment of the new glorified life. Through his cross and resurrection, the Paschal Mystery as we call it, Christ became life-giving Spirit for all of us. He bids us to take up our cross and follow him with the promise that this leads to a more abundant life.

Throughout history, disciples of Jesus have lived out this truth. After his failure at Athens, Paul determined to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified. Many Christians have spread the Gospel by bearing the cross of martyrdom. Some, like St. Catherine of Siena and St. Francis of Assisi, embraced the cross so completely that it left its imprint on their bodies. In our time, Mother Teresa bore the cross of spiritual desolation for most of her life serving the poor.

Rather than give a eulogy for Fr. Boff, I raised him up at this point in my homily as a contemporary example of Christian cross-bearing. From that perspective, I recalled some of the comments of others. His nephews and nieces saw their uncle as a generous, non-judgmental man who was present to them as a priest in the important moments of family weddings, baptisms and funerals. A classmate called him "the premier evangelist" of the Diocese of Toledo. His good priest friend Bob Holden spoke of him, with deep respect and still growing appreciation, simply as a man of faith. My sister Barbara, a rookie teacher at Bernie's parish, recalled him as the thoughtful young priest who made her a Christmas crib which she still uses and treasures. His friend and collaborator in ministry, Sr. Nancy Mathias, described his vision and ministry as gradually expanding, encompassing larger concerns. A priest honored him as the one who gave him a greater appreciation of African-American culture. Another colleague saw him as a towering legendary figure, who helped inspire his own vocation to the priesthood. For many, Fr. Boff was the face of the Catholic Church in the inner city of Toledo. A woman who grew up in the central city credited him for helping to get her started academically, which eventually led to a doctorate and a tenured position as a university professor. One woman expressed her great pride in the diocesan priesthood when Fr. Boff publicly stood up for the rights of the poor. An African-American man told me how grateful he was to Fr. Boff for visiting his homebound wife even though she was not Catholic.

I shared these stories as examples of Bernie's embrace of the cross. He had a special compassion for those who bore the cross of prejudice, exclusion, and injustice. His inner spiritual life, shaped by the cross, motivated him to reach out to others who were in need in an expanding circle of care. He did so out of inner conviction and without excessive worry over results and the inevitable criticisms that came his way.

During his brief papacy, Pope Francis has repeatedly encouraged the clergy not to confine themselves to the sacristy, which ends up being suffocating, but to breathe the fresh air of service to the poor and needy. We can reflect on Fr. Boff and his ministry as a prototype of the priestly service envisioned by Pope Francis.

In the early 1960s, Bernie did an organized “urban plunge” in the inner city of Chicago where he visited social service agencies, lived on just a few dollars a day and encountered the community-organizing tactics of Saul Alinsky. Drawing on this experience, Bernie established the Bible Center to serve the people living in the inner city of Toledo. Volunteer teachers tutored area youngsters using the Montessori method. During the summer, collegians came from around the region to canvass the neighborhood and feed the poor. Bernie invited guest priests to preside at the daily celebration of the Eucharist, which exposed us to a new world and provided spiritual nourishment for the participants.

In March of 1965, Martin Luther King was determined to lead a march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, the state capital, to protest the exclusion of black Americans from voting. Thwarted by a vicious attack by police on “Bloody Sunday,” Dr. King asked clergy and other supporters to come to Selma to participate in another march. On March 15th, Bernie Boff, along with some other Toledo priests, answered that call and went to Selma where they participated in the first part of the successful march to Montgomery that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Later, Bernie recalled his trepidation as Dr. King announced the beginning of the march and his relief when the first phase proved to be peaceful.

Always attuned to the cause of the poor, Bernie watched closely the 1968 Poor Peoples Campaign, planned by Dr. King and carried out after his assassination, which demanded economic justice for poor Americans. Participants in the march to Washington set up a tent city on the Washington Mall, known as Resurrection City, which provided shelter for the initial 3,000 residents, mostly poor people from around the country. Sensing some of the practical needs of the residents, Fr. Boff, with the help of three young black men, loaded up his station wagon with food and drove to Washington where they distributed the food and lived in the tent city for a few days. The Poor Peoples Campaign did not succeed in getting economic rights legislation passed, and Resurrection City had many internal problems, but Bernie’s limited participation served as a symbolic action, expressing his solidarity with poor people everywhere and his commitment to helping the needy in Toledo.

On the homefront, Bernie’s wide circle of care encompassed the Protestant communities in Toledo. For decades, he met weekly with prominent local pastors to pray and reflect together on the common lectionary readings for the following Sunday. His committed-openness enabled him to incorporate many valuable insights from the Protestant world into his Catholic perspective. Bernie’s fundamental convictions reflected the Protestant emphasis on the Scriptures as well as a theology of grace which highlights God’s initiative in the saving process.

From 1987 to 2001, Fr. Boff served as Director of the Office of Global Concerns, which gave him a platform for promoting the diocesan Mission of Accompaniment that involves a working relationship between the Toledo diocese and the Diocese of Hwange, Zimbabwe. Bernie visited our mission team there six times and developed a great love and respect for the native BaTonga people who lived there. Along with a courageous missionary, Ruth Ann Leidorf, Bernie wrote a book, *Surprises of the Spirit*, exemplifying the ideal of “reverse mission” which recognizes that missionaries both teach and learn and that cultural exchanges are mutually enriching. In reflecting what he learned from the BaTonga people, Bernie highlighted their great generosity, even when suffering the cross of deprivation.

For most of the last decade of his life, Fr. Boff suffered from Parkinson’s disease. When diagnosed, he showed little interest in causes or cures, but concentrated primarily on accepting this latest cross in his life. Instead of complaining as his physical powers diminished and his mind darkened, he offered it all for his brother priest Jerry Robinson. On May 11, 2006, Fr. Robinson was convicted of the bizarre 1980 murder of Sr. Margaret Ann Pahl. Bernie, who attended every session of the three-week trial, longed to write a book exposing the flaws in the prosecution’s case and the oversights of the defense, but his failing health prevented him from doing so. On numerous occasions, Bernie visited Jerry in prison and always came back impressed with the way his fellow priest was accepting his cross and providing valuable ministry to the other inmates. On more than one occasion, Bernie told me that he knew Jerry was innocent; not that he thought so, but that he knew with absolute assurance, although he never told me how. Perhaps this silence was one more cross that my friend had to bear. His cruciform heart and paschal imagination helped him to accept this and all his crosses as the seedbed for fruitful growth. Only if the grain of wheat dies does it bear fruit.

Fr. Bernard J. Boff, who breathed the fresh air of social concern and historic events, leaves a legacy for all who knew him and beyond. As we move forward, he is a marvelous prototype of the involved Christian envisioned by Pope Francis: living a simple lifestyle, reaching out to the poor, carrying the cross gracefully, and laboring for justice and peace.

And now we commend him to the God who gathers his faithful ones with tenderness and care (Is 40: 9-11), and who brings to light what is hidden in darkness while rewarding all the servants of Christ who have embraced his cross. (1 Cor 4: 1-5)