

Episcopal bishop known for scholarship, advocacy dies at age 81

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Frederick Houk Borsch, a bishop, academic, and advocate for social justice, died April 11 at age 81.

Borsch died of complications from myelodysplastic syndrome at his home in Philadelphia, according to the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, where he served as bishop from 1988 to 2002.

He also taught New Testament and Anglican studies at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Seabury-Western Seminary, and General Theological Seminary. He was dean of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley and dean of the chapel and religious life at Princeton University.

Peter W. Marty, the *Christian Century's* publisher, who met Borsch during his tenure as interim dean at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, said Borsch “wove pastoral instinct and theological scholarship into everything he did with an ease that was so enviable. He was erudite without being stuffy, an intellectual who understood the urgency for justice, and a humble guy who listened well. I always admired the way he could take a biblical text and reveal all kinds of little divine surprises by simply turning it inside out. He was a tremendous gift to the church.”

In a 1971 article in the *Century*, Borsch examined how Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature uses animal symbolism to “depersonalize and dehumanize the enemy.”

“The monster and its minions, conceived as superhuman in power but subhuman in their bestiality, merited none of the understanding and tolerance due one’s fellows,” he wrote. “No quarter need be granted such implacable and corrupt beings, no redemption envisioned for them.”

In a 1985 essay, Borsch recounted surviving a plane crash that killed two others. When friends suggested that God had rescued him, Bosch said that rather than intervening to save all but a few, the Spirit shares in suffering and seeks to transform it.

“For some people such a God may seem rather weak,” he wrote. “But for others this is the God who is always present to the world and to whom we are always present. Whether the plane lands or goes over the end, whether we live or die, this God—even in the valley of the shadow of death—is always with us.”

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