



William Sloane Coffin

Biography Timeline: **June 1, 1924**, born, New York, New York, son of William, Sr., furniture store executive and Catherine (Butterfield); **1933**, father dies; **1934**, mother moves family to Carmel, California; family is assisted financially by his uncle Henry Sloane Coffin (who will eventually be president of Union Theological Seminary); **1938**, practices piano for hours a day in Paris and studies with Mlle. Nadia Boulanger with a view to becoming a concert pianist; **1942**, graduates from Phillips Academy; **1943**, studies for one year at Yale University Music School; **1943-1947**, serves in U.S. Army; **1949**, BA, Yale University; **1949-1950**, attends Union Theological Seminary; **1950-1953**, works for Central Intelligence Agency on Russian affairs; **1956**, BD, Yale Divinity School; ordained as Presbyterian minister; marries ballet dancer and actress Eva Rubenstein, daughter of pianist Arthur Rubenstein; with Eva, has three children, Amy, Alexander, and David; **1956-1957**, acting chaplain, Phillips Academy; **1957-1958**, chaplain, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts; **1958**, becomes chaplain, Yale University; **1961**, helps establish first training programs for the Peace Corps; one of eleven Freedom Riders who ventures to Montgomery, Alabama to integrate bus transportation and restaurants; **1965**, with John Bennett (of Union Theological Seminary) and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (of Jewish Theological Seminary) forms Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam; **1968**, divorced from Eva; **1969**, marries Harriet Harvey Gibney; **1975**, resigns Yale chaplaincy; spends year traveling, resting and writing memoir; **1977**, becomes senior minister, Riverside Church, New York City, **1978**, establishes Riverside Church Disarmament Program; **Christmas, 1979**, among delegation to Tehran to visit hostages; **1980**, divorced from Harriet; **December 10, 1982**, mother, Catherine Butterfield Coffin, dies; **January 17, 1983**, son Alexander dies; **1984**, marries Virginia Randolph ("Randy") Wilson; **1987**, retires from Riverside; **1988-1993**, head of Nuclear Freeze; in retirement lectures widely on themes of social justice and transformation of the church; **1999**, suffers stroke; continues to lecture, preach, and write, publishing two of his most widely read books; **April 12, 2006**, dies peacefully at home, Strafford, Vermont; **April 20, 2006**, funeral held at Riverside Church, with Dr. James Forbes presiding, reflections by Cora Weiss, Bill Moyers, and Marian Wright Edelman, and eulogy by James Carroll; **April 22, 2006**, memorial service held at the United Church of Strafford, Strafford, Vermont; cremains buried in the Strafford Cemetery, with his headstone engraved with one of his signature maxims: "*Amo Ergo Sum*" (I Love Therefore I Am); **May 27, 2006**, public memorial service held at Yale University's Bettell Chapel.

William Sloane Coffin, Jr. was "to the manor born" in New York City, yet the arc of his life would lead him, willingly and gladly, to encounter all manner of human existence in a life of enthralling contrasts. He trained as a concert pianist, and he

volunteered for service as a soldier in two wars. He worked for the Central Intelligence Agency on Russian affairs, and he sat at the feet of the world's greatest theologians as he prepared for a life of ministry. He became chaplain at Yale University, and he expressed the height of his homiletical powers as pastor of Riverside Church. He helped to galvanize awareness of the civil rights struggle as one of eleven Freedom Riders who ventured to Montgomery, Alabama, and he wrote, mused, and prayed in his final home in rural Vermont.

In the expression of his opinions and in his public ministries, he was no stranger to controversy. And yet his warmth, charm and basic positive regard for all persons would eventually earn him respect even from those who didn't share one iota of his positions.

Warren Goldstein, author of the most thorough biographical account and analysis of Coffin's life to date, put it well: "Coffin's preaching remained relevant and inspiring ... for forty years because, like the biblical prophets, he never allowed his enemies – racism, war, nuclear weapons, hunger, homophobia – as much power as he ascribed to the love of God. By taking his God seriously and preaching Christianity joyously, William Sloane Coffin Jr. helped create a 'holy impatience' with injustice...that will live long beyond his own life." (1)

Poet Edward Arlington Robinson once described the human enterprise as "a kind of spiritual kindergarten in which millions of befuddled infants are trying the spell God with the wrong blocks." (2) For all of his public ministry, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., sought to lead countless persons, both willing and unwilling infants and oldsters, to

learn lessons that have helped us all spell “God” with more of the right blocks: at Yale University with his prophetic witness to students, faculty, administrators, alums, and the nation as a whole ;at Riverside Church, with his daring leadership and powerful preaching, beginning in the gorgeous Gotham of New York City, but always going beyond to a wider congregation; in his championing of the causes of the poor and the nuclear freeze movement, with the luster of leadership he lent so generously. Always and ever Coffin was priming countless folks to participate in a more humane, a more faithful “spelling bee.”

The author of seven books, Coffin came to embody the noblest elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition, consistently bearing in his demeanor an effusive graciousness. He possessed a consistent capacity to share his compassionate, caring heart with those he loved and with the world, on real terms and in real time.

Coffin’s prayers, in Sunday morning worship and in countless public venues, were characterized by a sure grasp of the grand nature of faith and faith’s connection with the great issues of the day. In other words, his prayers had “size.” Tinged with great oratory, Coffin’s prayers resorted to the formality of “Thee’s” and Thou’s” of the King James Bible.(3)

Coffin’s prayers were, at once, pastorally sensitive and prophetically passionate. While he could soar into poetic heights, especially in his genius use of parallelisms and powerful images, Coffin’s prayers always included references to specific events of the day.

Coffin described himself as a “magpie,” reframing insights from other great souls.(4) Yet, he was a keen and master wordsmith who worked hard on all of his spoken presentations, whether at a social justice rally, in a pulpit sermon, or in his prayers, thereby creating one memorable quote after another, throughout his long and storied career.

“... unless we become meek, there will be no one left to inherit the earth...”(5)

“... human unity is based not on agreement but on mutual concern....”(6)

“... never mind how crude or how trivial your prayers may sound to you. There are no unimportant tears to God.”(7)

“We are always called to love the good more than we hate the evil, lest we only become damn good haters.”(8)

“There is too much dignity in too many prayers – dignity at the expense of specificity.”(9)

“Prayer is praying ‘Our father who art in heaven’ when everything within us longs to cry out ‘My father,’ because ‘our’ includes that horrible divorced husband, that wayward child; it includes muggers, rapists, the Iranian captors, all the people who jam thorns into our flesh.”(10)

A Prayer by William Sloane Coffin

“O God, who hast created a world beautiful beyond any singing of it, gratefully we acknowledge that of thy fullness have we received, grace upon grace. Grant now that we may be responsible in the measure that we have received.

“Keep us eager to pursue truth beyond the outermost limits of human thought, scornful of the cowardice that dares not face new truth, the laziness content with half-truth, and the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth.

“Strengthen our resolve to see fulfilled, the world around and in our time, all hopes for justice so long deferred, and keep us on the stony, long, and lonely road that leads to peace. May we think for peace, struggle for peace, suffer for peace. Fill our hearts with courage that we not give in to bitterness and self-pity, but learn rather to count pain and disappointment, humiliation and set-back, as but straws on the tide of life.”(11)

Praying with William Sloane Coffin: Suggestions for Use

- Day 1 Pray today a prayer of thanksgiving for the witness of William Sloane Coffin, Jr., expressing, in whatever words you choose, your appreciation for his conjoining of the pastoral and prophetic tasks of faith.
- Day 2 Pray a prayer of petition today that your warmth, wit and basic positive regard for all others might so increase that even those who do not share your opinions will come to respect you.
- Day 3 Pray today with an openness to any grief or pain you may be carrying in your heart, knowing that “there are no unimportant tears to God.”
- Day 4 Pray today with a request for increased sensitivity toward the plight of all the children who live in poverty around the world. Pray for wisdom as to what your role will be in alleviating their suffering.
- Day 5 Pray today about specific people in your life that need to be blessed by an awareness of God’s presence in their lives and what that can mean for their healing and wholeness.
- Day 6 Pray today for world peace, but pray for it with an eye to the indigenous fulfillment of peace where you live, in your place of worship, in your neighborhood, in your work place, in your school, in your home.
- Day 7 Pray today for a great fidelity to truth – in your personal life, in the life among your friends, in the wider community, in the nation, and around the world. Recall Coffin’s prayer: “Keep us eager to pursue truth beyond the outermost limits of human thought, scornful of the cowardice that dares not face new truth, the laziness content with half-truth, and the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth.”(12)

NOTES

- 1 Warren Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 333.
- 2 Quoted in Mark Van Doren, *Edward Arlington Robinson* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1927), p. 25.

- 3 See *Prayers from Riverside*, edited by Leo S. Thorne (New York: Pilgrim press, 1983), pp. 26-27, 36, 49-50, 92-93, ; see also *The William Sloane Coffin Sermon Archive Project* at <http://www.williamsloanecoffin.org/>.
- 4 The "maggie" description is from a phone conversation with Bill Coffin, April 2001.
- 5 Remembered from a speech Coffin made to a Disciples Peace Fellowship gathering at the time of the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Louisville, Kentucky, 1973.
- 6 William Sloane Coffin, *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Vol. I* (Louisville: Westminster, 2008), p. 302.
- 7 Ibid., p. 329.
- 8 William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster, 2003), p. 20.
- 9 *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, Vol. I*, p. 329.
- 10 Ibid. There is almost no end to the aphorisms and poetic parallelisms that Coffin coined throughout his speaking life. And there is seemingly no ending in sight regarding the absolutely specific sources or contexts concerning when or where Coffin said any particular statement. What he quipped to a television reporter after a protest rally might be included in a newspaper editorial. A witticism he offered as a raconteur at a cocktail party could become the introductory attention grabber in a college lecture. What had been part of a pastoral prayer very often ended up one day in a sermon. These are a mere smattering of Coffin's prodigious output of "quotable quotes."
- 11 William Sloane Coffin, *The Courage to Love* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), p.90.
- 12 Ibid.

FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, AND REFLECTION

- William Sloane Coffin, *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Vols. I & II* (Louisville: Westminster, 2008)
- William Sloane Coffin, *The Courage to Love* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982)
- William Sloane Coffin, *The Heart Is A Little To The Left: Essays on Public Morality* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1999)
- William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004)
- William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to A Young Doubter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)
- William Sloane Coffin, *Once to Every Man: A Memoir* (New York: Atheneum, 1977)
- William Sloane Coffin, *A Passion for the Possible: A Message to U.S. Churches* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993)
- Warren Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)
- Leo S. Thorne, ed., *Prayers from Riverside* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983)