

When someone makes a nice donation to the cathedral, I like to write out a thank-you note. They'll get our tax deduction letter at the end of the year, but I want people to know more quickly how much I appreciate their kindness. Taking the time to handwrite a note may seem quaint and kind to you, but it has its dangers. On more than one occasion in my ministry, I'm embarrassed to say, the amount I wrote in my acknowledgment was one important digit short from what the donor actually gave.

That is how I had my first interaction with Linda Whitaker-Schmitt. She wrote me the nicest letter—one that could have begun, "Dear Bonehead," but it didn't. All she wanted was to make sure she had given what she thought, and we received what she gave. For me, that one brief letter revealed much about her: She was a successful businesswoman, she worked on details, she cared about charities, she wanted her contributions kept quiet, she understood psychology, she communicated when there was a difficulty, she was comfortable raising hard topics with people in positions of responsibility, and she believed she could resolve a problem with style and grace. I envy the members of her family who got to enjoy these qualities every day throughout Linda's long, remarkable life.

Linda was smart, and she convinced others they were too. She loved her Church even with our sometimes bewildering rules. She loved Bill. She loved her kids and wanted to live long enough to see them reach certain milestones. She created a circle of friends who all felt they were special because of her. Everyone loved her. You wonder if Saint Paul had a premonition of Linda's life when he wrote the famous hymn about love in his First Letter to the Corinthians.

It's hard to watch someone so vibrant suffer. That's why the words of the Book of Wisdom sound comforting. When someone who was just suffers and dies, Wisdom says this about their souls: "As gold in the furnace, [God] proved them, and as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself.... [They] shall dart about as sparks through stubble.... Because grace and mercy are with his holy ones, and his care is with his elect." Linda liked to make an impact quietly without getting recognition. She probably learned that from God.

Saint John recounts that at the Last Supper Jesus prayed for the people he was leaving behind. He said something I could imagine Linda saying about her family and friends: "Father, those whom you gave me are your gift to me. I wish that where I am they also may be with me." I can imagine Jesus having Linda in mind as he said to the Father, "I made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them."

A woman who liked to tie up loose ends, Linda visited us last fall when she realized the seriousness of her diagnosis. She laid out her funeral plans and told our staff we could pray for her, but not publicly in our petitions at Mass or in the printed bulletin. She always put other people ahead of herself.

Now it is our turn to put Linda first: in our prayers, that God will grant her the reward of her labors; and in our lives, by imitating her goodness. Linda always seemed to know just what to say. We pray for her today the way she taught us: with style and grace.