

Some years ago at a reception Bishop John Sullivan walked up to a priest holding a cup and started a conversation. He asked the priest what he was drinking. The priest said, "Um, coffee." The bishop said, "Oh, great! Do you mind if I have a sip?" The priest said, "Um, well, I suppose so." The bishop took a swallow and jolted back his head. "That's not coffee!" he said. "That's scotch!" The priest said, "Glory be to God! It's a miracle!"

That story may not be true, but it's the kind of joke that our former bishop loved to tell, and he could tell them by the dozens. Bishop John Sullivan died two weeks ago at the age of 80, of complications from Parkinson's disease. He served our diocese from 1977 until 1993. He is well remembered for his humor, his ability to remember names, and his promotion of lay ministry in the church. He ordained me to the priesthood in 1979. In 1985 he put me to work for the Center for Pastoral Life and Ministry, a team of people who develop parish volunteers and professionals. And in 1989 he asked me to become the pastor of St. Regis. He's had a direct influence on my life and vocation.

The bishop believed that the Church would flourish only if we let loose the gifts the Spirit had already placed in our midst. He believed these gifts filled the Church, and if we called them forth we could enrich the lives of individuals and of the community.

Here at St. Regis we have seen Bishop Sullivan's vision in full force. Twenty parishioners have taken the diocesan formation series called New Wine. Our work relies on councils who all reach their decisions by consensus. Our parish council oversees our vision with a long-range plan. All of this developed under a bishop whose love inspired people to share their time, talent, and treasure for a cause we believed in.

The Book of Sirach says you can tell what people are like by their words. When somebody speaks, their faults will show up, just like refuse appears when you shake a sieve. Before you praise anybody, Sirach says, let them speak.

Bishop Sullivan spoke words that revealed the beauty of his heart, a heart of charity, a heart for the Church. People will judge us in much the same way. They will judge from our words our strengths and our faults. If we have hatred in our heart, it will come out in our words. If we have prejudice toward others, it will come out in our words. If we think more of our job than we do of our family; if we spend on ourselves, rather than on others; if we have talent, but hide it; if we have faith, but starve it; it will come out in our words. Thankful for the service of our former bishop, let us ask God to purify our hearts and sweeten our words.