

Back in 1989 I worked for a couple of our diocesan offices. One Wednesday morning I was preparing to drive from the chancery up to Lexington to visit the pastor there when my phone rang; Bishop Sullivan wanted to see me. Knowing how much I had to do I probably thought, "This better be good." When I entered his office he called in the vicar general and the chancellor. This would be like sitting in the oval office, and hearing the president say, "Just a minute, I want Al and Hillary in on this." Bishop Sullivan told me that Fr. Reardon was resigning as the pastor of St. Regis. I recognized immediately how painful that would be for our parish. Then he said, "We'd like you to become the new pastor." I had spent three years in Rome completing a doctorate in theology, and three years in the diocese in ministry formation; I thought I'd be doing that work for at least another four years. This completely surprised me. I reminded Bishop Sullivan that St. Regis was a large parish and I had zero experience as a pastor. He still wanted me to do it. I asked how soon he wanted a decision. He said, "We'd like you to start today." I agreed.

I walked into a parish where a lot of feelings lay just beneath the surface. It was hard to talk about. Two former pastors went on to become bishops; now a pastor had resigned. Since that time two other priests have come and gone: one was sick and died too young; another was loved by those who knew him well and criticized by many who knew him less. We've seen friends move away to other parts of the city, other parishes. We've suffered a lot of hurt.

We've also suffered disagreements. Being a member of this parish does not guarantee harmony. Should we permit smoking? Should we permit alcohol; if so, when? How much authority do councils have? How do we select their membership? How do we resolve disputes about athletics? Who orders tile and carpeting? Should we have wood chips or pea gravel under the playground equipment? Can women's issues find a hearing in church? If you've joined any of these discussions, you know how heated they can be. Now, as if that's not enough, we've added on a few controversial questions: How do we renovate our building? What makes a church building Catholic? Is it right to spend this kind of money? We are a feisty parish. We are opinionated, and if we don't get our way we can whine and gossip with the best of them.

Why, you may wonder, did I never go back to Bishop Sullivan and ask him to reconsider this whole business? I'll tell you why: because the spirit of St. Regis always inspires me.

Some of it is obvious to you; you'll see volunteers giving as many hours here as paid staff: Terry Block formerly of the athletic association, Ken & Teresa Van Pelt still with the catechumenate, Ann Julich with baptismal preparation, Marilyn Dimarco & Phil Hoffman with Stephens' Ministry, Rose Solo in the parish office, Glen Ernstman with right-to-life, and Roberta Kipper with Comunidad Ita-Maura. Some of that spirit you may never see: the people who come every morning at 6:15 to start their day with prayer, the funeral choir that provides music when your heart is so heavy you don't know if you'll ever sing again, the day care volunteers, the PTO, the crafters, the kids in school of religion who visited Good Shepherd Community, the ministers who bring

communion to the sick. There's something going on out here. There's no other parish in our region, Catholic or not, who can boast that kind of service. What makes that service so striking to me, is that people carry it out in spite of their hurts and differences. The St. Regis spirit is indomitable. It has survived the tragic loss of youthful members, abrupt changes in leadership, and the fears that follow any family and neighborhood in the 1990's.

Our disagreements dissolve, for we are resiliently bound by faith in Christ, love for the church, and service to the needy. We are Catholics; we treasure our eucharist. We share high ideals; we share values that matter; we share a vision of racial harmony. This neighborhood, this cautious neighborhood needs what we have. It needs the service, the ideals, and the spirit which we possess. It would be a tragedy if at this moment in our history we let our hurts and our disagreements overpower us. What we propose is a building that will help us serve, a building that will stir our faith, a building which affirms the spirit which unites us and gives us daily strength.

This campaign can form the church: not just the church building, but the church that's us. We'll have many disagreements ahead; we can deal with those, if we heal one another's hurt. Every twenty-five years the pope declares a "holy year," a year of reconciliation. This is our thirtieth year; we're overdue at St. Regis. It's time to reconcile, to accept our differences, and to affirm the good spirit which lies at their root and unites us all. That's the one church our many gifts can really build.

Four and a half years after that talk with Bishop Sullivan I met Bishop Raymond Boland. I told him about you: our problems, our dreams, and our spirit. He looked at our plans for this campaign and then raised his eyes to ask me a personal question, very similar to the one Bishop Sullivan had asked. He said, "This campaign will take several years. Are you willing to stay on as pastor of St. Regis to see it through?" I told him yes; there's no other job I'd rather have, and some of you know I've had offers and inquiries. But I love being a pastor, and I love St. Regis. It's the best job in the world. It's not always happy--sometimes I hurt too. But it is always adventurous and filled with meaning. I believe in this parish. I believe God has called us from faith to service. I pray now that God will give us the means to serve ever better.