



## Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland

Bishop Emeritus

Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

### Death of Retired Bishop Sullivan

February 11, 2001

A great love affair has come to an end. Bishop John J. Sullivan loved all of the people who made western Missouri their home. He knew their names and their children's names — an uncanny facility that so few possess. He will be vividly remembered and sorely missed by those whose friendship he valued, and especially those who never forgot him during the long, trying days of his debilitating illness.

When Parkinson's disease forced Bishop Sullivan to resign as bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph, he naturally worried about his successor. If he was disappointed when the bishop of Birmingham was named in 1993, he never showed it. He gave me a wonderful welcome and lovingly entrusted to my pastoral care the people he had led with vision and insight.

During his five years as bishop of Grand Island and 16 years as bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph he had many tough decisions to make. Some, as he had predicted, were not universally acclaimed. He personified the fact that the Second Vatican Council did not constitute a painless revolution. In his latter years, he worried that he may have hurt others, and he hoped they would understand that everything he did, he did for the good of the Church.

In many ways, Bishop Sullivan was a generation ahead of his time. His insistence on lay ministry programs was not always equally favored by his fellow bishops. Today, however, most will tell you that he gave our diocese a head start in forming and using lay ministers. This was just a part of his vision that seems destined for vindication as it becomes a millennium reality.

Bishop Sullivan gloried in the company of his fellow bishops. At bishops' meetings he would be surrounded by his old friends in a palpable spirit of camaraderie, as he regaled them with stories. Clearly, in John Sullivan's Irish genes was preserved the gift of the *seanchai*, the ancient Celtic art of the storyteller. There will be laughter around the Pearly Gates as John Sullivan makes new friends and renews old friendships.

John, bishop, priest and friend, may your noble soul rest in peace.

AMEN



**Bishop John Joseph Sullivan**  
*of the*  
**Catholic Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph**  
**1920 ~ 2001**

**Come Lord Jesus**

The Most Reverend John J. Sullivan, fourth bishop of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph, died February 11, 2001, at the age of 80. Bishop Sullivan led the Catholic people of northern and western Missouri from 1977 until 1993, when he retired due to the effects of Parkinson's disease. At the time of his death, Bishop Sullivan resided at the Jeanne Jugan Center and received the best of care from the Little Sisters of the Poor.

The first son of Walter and Mary Berney Sullivan was born in Horton, Kansas, on July 5, 1920, and grew up in Oklahoma City. A graduate of St. Benedict's College, Atchison, Kansas, and Kenrick Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, Sullivan was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Oklahoma City and Tulsa in 1944. Pastoral assignments included parishes in Tulsa, Guthrie and Oklahoma City.

From 1961 to 1968, then Father Sullivan served as the National Director of Lay Volunteers for the Catholic Church Extension Society, an organization dedicated to serving the poor of the United States. Through that assignment, Sullivan witnessed the benefits of equipping lay people with ministry skills. Sullivan continued to empower the laity as Episcopal Vicar for Eastern Oklahoma and as Bishop of Grand Island Nebraska.

In 1977, Pope Paul VI appointed Sullivan as Bishop of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph. By 1978, Sullivan established the Center for Pastoral Life and Ministry and charged the office with forming lay Catholics with the skills necessary to administer parish and diocesan programs. Sullivan's vision evolved into a national movement with the founding of the Institute for Pastoral Life.

Bishop Sullivan also believed that education offered the best hope to break the cycle of poverty seen in the urban neighborhoods of Kansas City. In 1989, a partnership of corporate, civic and philanthropic leaders, joined the diocese to launch The Central City School Fund. The Fund offers scholarships for urban youth to attend neighborhood Catholic schools. At the time of his death, the group opened Catholic school doors to more than 5,000 students and offered more than \$17 million in operational support to seven of the poorest Catholic schools in the diocese.

An editorial in *The Kansas City Star* published at the time of his death characterized Sullivan as, "A remarkable combination of urgency and gentleness, insight and humor. . . .And it was humor that drew people together to help them recognize their common bonds. The church and the whole community are impoverished by the loss of this good man."

### **Remembering Bishop Sullivan**

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Kansas City, Missouri  
February 15, 2001  
Vigil Service

*If we have died with Christ, we believe we shall also live with Christ.*

Philippians 1:3-11

Gospel of John 21:15-17

## **Reflections from the Assembly**

### **George M. Noonan**

#### **Chancellor of the Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph**

John Sullivan was a man of great presence. Tall, broad shouldered, friendly, determined. He was widely known as a visionary, a person ahead of his time yet he really was, at the same time, a person very much rooted in his own time. He was a man of deep faith and conviction. He was a man of love.

Since his death this past Sunday I spent some time rereading his biography: *The Call to Ministry: The Vision of Bishop John J. Sullivan*. It was a comforting experience because in recent years his poor health prevented him from being as sharp and witty as he once was. It refreshed my memory of this man who was at times to me a caring father, a wise uncle, a boss, a mentor, but most often, a friend.

Our first reading this evening, was taken from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. It was one of Bishop Sullivan's favorites. Paul writes, "I thank my God every time I remember you..." I remember well my first meeting with John Sullivan. I was interviewing for the position of the Director of the Center for Pastoral Life and Ministry. After I met with the Search Committee he asked to see me. He wanted to size me up.

My roots are in New England and I think it's fair to say that the Church there can be quite formal, so I didn't know what to expect from this meeting. What a surprise I was in for. Bishop Sullivan greeted me very warmly, could pinpoint the town and county where I was living in Connecticut and then went on to tell me things about my home Diocese of Springfield, MA. He was so down to earth and passionate about the need for the Church to adequately minister to people. I was young and enthusiastic about the dream that he had for what the Church could be. He had dreamed the dream and it was one fashioned on the relationships he had had with so many people.

His years with the Extension Society, as national director of lay volunteers, placed him in relationship with so many idealistic and optimistic people. He knew, from experience, the desire people have to serve, to have an opportunity to make a difference. He helped ignite a passion in so many college age people that they discovered God's call in their lives and embarked

upon a journey of sorting out how they were going to live out that call. The experience transformed their lives.

After I accepted the position with the Center for Pastoral Life and Ministry, I had to submit my resignation to the Archbishop of Hartford and the Board of Trustees that governed my ministry. In the middle of announcing my resignation, one member of the Board interrupted and said, "Hey, I know Fr. Sullivan, he had a major influence in my life. It turns out that this man, while in College, had been an Extension volunteer.

In a conversation with Bishop Sullivan, shortly after I arrived in Kansas City, I mentioned this person assuming that the Bishop would have no recollection of this man from Canaan, Connecticut. I was sorely mistaken. Not only did he remember him, he also remembered his mother's name. Remembering people for him wasn't a salesperson's gimmick. I believe that he saw Christ in each person that he met and he didn't want to forget their names anymore than he would want to forget Jesus' name if he encountered him on the road. Remembering people for him was a way of building up God's kingdom. Relationships mattered.

In his retirement years we had many opportunities to spend time with one another. I cherish those times and learned so much from him. Frequently, it was during those times that Paul's words came to life. Bishop Sullivan loved to remember the many people that he knew, the many people who touched him and the many people he touched. He remembered them, often with tears in his eyes, and he was thankful to God for bringing them into his life.

Bishop Sullivan took seriously the words of our Lord to St. Peter that we heard in the Gospel read tonight. The thrice asked question "Do you love me?" is followed by the directives to "Feed my Lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." There were many lambs in his life. He cared deeply for children. And his concern was often focused around the value of education in general and of religious education in particular. His commitment to quality education for the poor and disenfranchised wasn't always popular. Parochial interests often interfered with his vision of breaking the cycle of poverty through education. His view was that education is for all God's people and that all people are God's people. He believed that he was following in Christ's footsteps. He loved Christ so he fed the lambs and did so unselfishly.

He tended his flock lovingly though not without difficulties. He confronted those who clung to a fortress Church of the past, at great cost to himself. He made tough decisions that led to Church and school closings, but always with an eye to strengthening the body of our local Church.

He felt a responsibility and an urgency to form people in their faith. On Tuesday evening, I was reading the homily he delivered here in this Cathedral for his installation on August 17, 1977. He was concerned about the large number of people who have no connection to a faith tradition. He said that "if a man or a woman has a chance, an opportunity to hear the truth and rejects it, then I can live with that. But, if a person never has a chance to hear, then I cannot sleep nights."

In later years, he, like Paul, was imprisoned. Not by four walls and bars but by his own body. The same body that made it possible for him to witness to the Lord, to bring Christ's love into the world, slowly let him down. I think the hardest times were when his memory had degenerated far enough so that he could no longer remember the punch line of a joke or the details of an event. He knew that his abilities were slipping and that knowledge was a heavy cross.

And yet he remembered you. He remembered every person who touched his life and how he touched theirs. He, like Paul, cherished those memories. He held in his heart the apostles prayer that "your love may more and more abound, both in understanding and wealth of experience, so that with a clear conscience and blameless conduct you may learn to value the things that really matter, up to the very day of Christ." (Phil. 1:9-10).

Listen to the stories of some of those who loved and cared for him so that his life will guide you to complete the good work that has been begun in you.

### **James P. Tierney Neighbor and Friend**

Bishop Sullivan was my friend, my neighbor, my client; most importantly, my treasured friend. What a Man! He bore his progressive Parkinson's with equanimity. Well, mostly! When his terrible disease got so bad that he could no longer stay in his cherished two-story house at Janssen Place, certain of the Chancery staff somewhat surreptitiously and against his will moved him out to a one-story, wheel-chair friendly house on 66 Street. On top of that, he learned that he was to be my next door neighbor. This alarming combination, I am told, caused him to want to fire some of the Chancery staff. But, of course, he didn't.

He was a wonderful neighbor. In our visits, I learned from him things that I could have learned in no other way. A touch of Scotch whiskey now and then naturally helped. But never enough to get him to talk about himself.

Everyone who knows him, knows about his wit, and his remarkable ability to recall names and some singular fact of nearly everybody he'd ever met. I think this indicated his intense, unfeigned interest in everyone he met. But a trait not so well known was his compassion – particularly for someone suffering. Without letting it be generally known, he regularly visited and consoled a number of AIDS victims living on Armour Boulevard near the Chancery.

I want to conclude with a very brief story. Before being made a bishop, Father Sullivan was the head of the Catholic Extension Society which supported a group of young lay volunteers. He often went out on the circuit with these young people. Two of the regulars were the Boggs sisters. They were energetic, attractive and talented. One of them, Barbara, wrote beautiful poetry as well as prose. While still young and married, Barbara developed a terminal illness and knew she was going to die soon. She published a remarkable piece about what she was going through. She called it, "An Unfinished Life, Diary of a Fatal Illness". In it, she tells about giving her mythical son the middle name of Sullivan, because of a priest she worked with admired, and who had consoled and supported her. That priest was this John Sullivan.

Barbara died too soon. But John Sullivan's relationship with the family continued. Just before he went to the Little Sisters, Barbara's mother, knowing of his malady, came to have lunch with him and some of his friends, including my wife. The mother was a New Orleans honey-dripper, duly matching wit with the Irish raconteur. I'm told it was quite a spectacle.

Barbara's mother, now in her 80's, is Lindy Boggs, the United States Ambassador to the Vatican. Barbara's sister is Cokie Roberts of television fame. Both of them have never forgotten what Father John Sullivan meant to a dying young woman and her family.

### **Jean Marie Hiesberger Shared the Vision for Lay Pastoral Ministry Formation**

I knew Bishop Sullivan first in his role as founder of the Institute for Pastoral Life interviewing me, then as the president of my board of directors, but most importantly, as the friend he became.

His vision in founding the Institute for Pastoral Life was to establish a national center to train people from *other* dioceses, needier dioceses who lacked the resources to train desperately needed pastoral ministers, especially in the poor and remote, or home mission places.

John Sullivan was **the** story-teller, but one of my favorite stories *about* him captures much of his personality and values. It is the incident in another diocese when a well-to-do parish received an enormous windfall from an estate. There was no way, he decided, that this parish needed all the monies from this bequest. However, there was a parish not far away in which there were people who were desperately poor. John Sullivan went to the leadership group in the first parish and asked them to consider sharing their good fortune.

He was amazed and bitterly disappointed when they declined. In his dismay he responded that from now on when he passed the parish he would no longer tip his hat respectfully because, he said, Christ could not be present in a community that could so reject caring for the poor.

To me this is an illustration, obviously of his priority of concern for the underprivileged but it also shows his ability to dream and envision what could be. I think it shows, too, his sly astuteness about who had the power and the means to rectify a problem, or enable his dreams to be carried out.

On the personal side, it shows how he would be just confounded when others could not understand and share his values. But like the true Irishman that he was, he didn't give up but, throughout his life, found many others who would say "yes" to his persistent pleas (and even badgering) to make real his dreams of people helping each other.

John Sullivan left this world on Sunday. If we can imagine anything of heaven we can be sure of two things:

1. By now he knows the names of everyone in heaven.
2. He's not even finished the first round of telling his stories.

John Sullivan, we miss you.

### **Sister Judy Warmbold Daughter of Charity and Faithful Friend**

In 1972, Bishop John recruited me – and 45 other Sisters – to minister on parish teams throughout the vast Diocese of Grand Island, Nebraska. Journeying with that 52-year-old vibrant leader on to his 80<sup>th</sup> year, and years of retirement, illness, inactivity and death has been a supreme privilege.

Some highlights of my memory of this Good Shepard:

- Early on in Nebraska, he preached, ***"There are only two things that matter, people and the relationships between them."***
- Two phone calls from him. One on the Eve of Ash Wednesday, 1977, after he received word that he would be transferred from Grand Island. He felt betrayed as

though the church was asking him to divorce the people. Three months later, after his days of anxious waiting, when some very large dioceses were open, his joy and relief when he said, **"I can get my arms around Kansas City."**

The vulnerable years, since the late 80s on – struggling with the emerging symptoms of Parkinson's, the decision to retire, loss of control and the loneliness. These were 12 years of suffering, as well as illumination of the loving spirit of Bishop Sullivan.

Death, and his fear of it, has been a common thread. The death of his brother, Dan, in 1991, devastated him. Once he told me, **"If I were going to start a religious community it would be to hold hands of people dying."** He certainly found this community in the Little Sisters of the Poor.

Perhaps you recall, two years ago the word went out that he was dying. After several days of vigil and visitors I asked him, "Do you think you are dying now?" Slowly, he looked at me and said, **"I don't know. What do YOU think?"**

From then on, he said, **"I'm living on borrowed breath."**

In the past decade, his most prized possession was the crucifix on the wall next to his bed which he pondered when awake during the night.

His life of suffering was usually peppered with humor. One evening, two nurses were getting him up from his nap and fussing over him. We talked like we were having a party. He raised his head as they were buttoning his shirt and said, **"You call this a party?!"**

How was this man when he was no longer independent? When he was unable to read, write, walk, feed himself, express his thoughts, remember, or tell a joke, the past, present and future merged. He communed with the living and the dead, and seemed to have visions and memories all jumbled into his unique imaginative concoctions. A steady theme was, **"I want to go home. I need to go home."**

Some treasured words from recent days:

- **"See those children playing over there?"** Bishop John frequently saw children playing.
- **"My niece Mary was talking to me. She said she loved me and if it wasn't for me. . ."**
- With urgency at supper, **"8,000 people and I have to give two talks and I'm not prepared. Would you help me?"**
- After hearing that a friend died, he leaned forward in his wheel chair saying, **"I want to go. Come on, let's go."** Then realizing, **"Tell them I'm unable to come and wish I could be with them. I care very much."**
- The day I told him that Peter Jennings on the evening news said the Pope had Parkinson's and almost fell backward on his pilgrimage in Jerusalem. He signaled me to stop his wheelchair at the door of the dining room. **"I want to tell them." In a**

**full voice he said, "The Pope has Parkinson's. He fell backwards. We must pray for him."**

- One night in December he said, **"I'm in a heck of a mess."** From then on, I saw him moving to a new plane of freedom, with more upward looking as though in ecstasy or having visions.
- **"I can't remember anything anymore."** Upon sharing aloud with him special moments in his life with family and friends, he said, **"You're reminding me of everything."** I asked, "Is this good or bad?" He said, **"Good."**

**"I'm living on borrowed breath."** As he peacefully breathed his last breath, I was reminded of a comment he made a year ago: **"We keep going. We support the beauty of creation." Come, Lord Jesus!**

**Reverend Robert Cameron  
Priest of the Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph**

My words will be few, I trust worthy of this moment. I promise not to tell "Cajun stories," because I'm in the presence of the master – truly Bishop Sullivan was the *raconteur* and humorist *par excellence!*

I first met Bishop Sullivan on July 1, 1977, when I was asked to meet him on his arrival at the Downtown Airport for his first visit after his appointment as our fourth bishop of the combined Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph. That encounter – wasn't every meeting an encounter? – was my first of too many to count over these last two dozen years.

I was privileged over the past three years, while Bishop Sullivan was a star-guest at the Little Sisters of the Poor, to be able to concelebrate Mass with him each week. There are marvelous memories, too numerous to relate.

However, I would share one incident with you. While he was our Bishop and, apparently, things weren't going as smoothly as either he or many priests and others would have liked, he was preparing for a diocesan celebration of the Priests' Jubilees, he said to me in his inimitable style – sort of with a grunt – **"Ugh, Bob, what can I say?"**

I had just received a note from Sr. Claudette LaVerdiere, the former superior of the Maryknoll Sisters. On the cover of the card were the words I gave to him which became the sum total of his comments on that occasion.

I quote, **"I often think that people we love and who love us – not only make us more human – but they become a part of us and we carry them around all the time – whether we see them or not. . . And, in some ways, we are a sum total of those who love us and those we give ourselves to."**

I submit that these words epitomize Bishop Sullivan's life and typify his magnanimous heart. He truly loved people!

"Tis smooth sailing from now on, Bishop!

**Side article text below:**

- In the face of death, we proclaim that God created us for eternal life. The Church calls each member of the community to take part in the ministry of consolation: to care for the dying, to pray for the dead, and to comfort those who mourn. Christians celebrate funeral rites to offer praise and thanksgiving for the gift of a life now returned to God. At Vigil Services, family, friends and colleagues sometimes offer personal remembrances.