

CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

Issue #13

June 24, 2007

THE EXTRAORDINARY MONSIGNOR STAFFORD

St. James Cathedral has been blessed with many gifted pastors over the past one hundred years. One of the most remarkable was surely Monsignor James Gordon Stafford, the Cathedral's third pastor, who guided the parish through thick and thin from 1919 until 1935.

Father Stafford (he became a Monsignor in 1925) was an extraordinary man. Born in Auburn, New York, in 1882, he studied for the priesthood in Maryland and then at the Sulpician Seminary of Issy, near Paris. "Heeding the call for laborers in the Lord's vineyard in the great Northwest," Stafford came to Seattle immediately following his ordination by one of the great lights of the American Church—Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore.

Father Stafford threw himself wholeheartedly into his priestly ministry. He served at St. Mary's and then at St. Margaret's in Seattle, before being appointed pastor of St. James Cathedral by Bishop O'Dea in 1919. "The appointment is immensely popular everywhere," reported the Progress, "except in St. Margaret's Parish."

It was as pastor of the Cathedral that Father Stafford's gifts found their fullest expression. Less than a year after his arrival at St. James, Father Stafford began a fundraising drive which not only cleared the debt remaining on the Cathedral from the collapse of the dome (\$100,000!) but also raised \$80,000 to build O'Dea High School. Father Stafford also built a new convent for the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, who were most grateful for the wonderful new accommodations provided by "our very zealous new pastor."

At St. James, Father Stafford introduced the envelope system, thus making the Cathedral Parish the first to use envelopes on the West Coast. His methods were effective, but hardly subtle: "Before taking up the collection, ushers will give envelope and pencil to visitors, newcomers and to those who forgot to bring theirs. Thus it will be seen that there can be no excuse for man, woman or child for not using the envelope... Their rule is to deal with all alike, without regard to persons... even if the party be well known to them and even if a member of one's own family. This is the rule."

But fundraising was not Msgr. Stafford's only talent. "Although necessity forced his genius to manifest itself in financial enterprise on behalf of the Church," reported the Progress on the occasion of the silver jubilee of Msgr. Stafford's ordination, "it is rather in the artistic realm of the Church's liturgical ceremonies that it has had most



Monsignor Stafford surrounded by children of the Cathedral School in the late 1920s.

complete expression. Under his direction the Cathedral boys choir was developed and historic ceremonies were clothed with such perfection of liturgical wealth and beauty that they are known and admired by priests and prelates throughout the country." Msgr. Stafford's wonderful partnership with Dr. Franklin Sawyer Palmer, the Cathedral's music director from 1907 to 1935, led to innovative projects, like the regular broadcast of the Sunday Mass on the radio, beginning in 1925, and the installation of a new sanctuary organ in 1926. The music program achieved national renown, and Pietro Yon—organist of St. Patrick's in New York City—once declared that "the rendition of Gregorian chant by the Cathedral choir could not be surpassed in this country."

This busy priest always had time for the children of the parish. Jack Gordon, who graduated from Cathedral School in 1935, recalls: "After school one day, Msgr. James Gordon Stafford took me as his guest to the Barney O'Connor Drug Store and Soda Fountain at Terry Avenue and Madison and bought me MY FIRST ROOT BEER FLOAT! I have always remembered that special treat and pray for Msgr. Stafford and all the priests and sisters at the Cathedral."

Msgr. Stafford celebrated the Silver Jubilee of his ordination on May 24, 1935. Bishop Shaugnessy presided, dozens of priests joined in the celebration, and there were "scores of altar boys and the hundred members of the Cathedral choirs." Said the Progress: "The sanctuary of the cathedral, over which Monsignor Stafford has presided as pastor for sixteen years, presented a glorious scene with the golden vestments of the offices of the Mass, and the altars aglow with candles, calla lilies, and silvered ferns and flowers, all proclaiming the happiness of the jubilarian's parishioners and fellow priests in the august occasion."

It was to be Msgr. Stafford's last great celebration at St. James Cathedral. Just five days after the Jubilee celebration, Msgr. Stafford was sent to new labors at Assumption in Bellingham, where he served as pastor from 1935 until his death in 1949. As the Progress editorial noted, "Monsignor Stafford's pastoral work has been characterized by vision, initiative, and a spirit of zeal that transcended the boundaries of the parish committed to his care and offered its service unselfishly in collaboration with his fellow priests for the welfare of the Diocese at large. His artistic sense and his devotion in the service of Almighty God always sought perfection as an ideal."

—Corinna Laughlin