

CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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THE DOME DESCENDS

It was the morning of Wednesday, February 2, 1916. Though a heavy snow was falling, life at St. James Cathedral was proceeding much as usual. It was a feast day, after all—the feast we now call the Presentation of the Lord, but which was then known as the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The priests of the parish offered the usual series of morning Masses. The children of the Cathedral School trudged through the snow to the Cathedral for the traditional blessing of candles. No doubt some of them were daydreaming about snowballs and toboggans as they sat close together in the chilly pews, under the watchful eyes of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.

Afternoon came; school was dismissed. The snow continued to fall. It seemed it had been snowing forever. Seattle, unused to such extremes, was shutting down. The trains couldn't get in or out of the city, the electric streetcars stopped running, and traffic came to a standstill. It must have been very quiet on First Hill when, without warning, the great dome descended.

No one saw it fall, but people all over the hill heard it. The sexton, James Creighton, was in the steam-heating plant nearby, and came running. The priests in the neighboring Rectory heard "a roar like the boom of a heavy gun" and hurried over. The sisters in the Cathedral School, readying their classrooms for the next day, heard what sounded like "a heavy snow slide," looked out the window, and saw that the dome was no more.

The great dome had collapsed into the Cathedral crossing, bringing much of the ceiling—an area 80 feet square—with it. The suddenness and violence of the collapse was such that all the windows in the building were shattered. The entire south transept of the Cathedral was buried in several feet of rubble—stone, wood, and steel, glass and copper, brick and mortar, and a great deal of snow. The pulpit was crushed under the debris, and the pews were sent flying in every direction. And yet, providentially, not a soul was in the Cathedral at the time of the disaster.



A man stands in the South Transept to give a sense of scale to the wreckage in this image from the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle. Why the dome collapsed is not entirely certain. The dome had clearly not been designed to bear the weight of so much snow—it had been snowing for twenty-seven straight hours at the time of the collapse. But the most likely theory suggests that there was a flaw in one of the steel trusses that supported the dome—a flaw that went undiscovered until that fateful Wednesday afternoon.

The priests' first concern was not for the building, but for the Blessed Sacrament. In their chronicle, the Sisters of the Holy Names marveled at the courage of the Cathedral priests, who waded through the wreckage to the tabernacle, to remove the Blessed Sacrament from the devastated building (the Sisters were greatly honored that their little Chapel became the place of reservation for the Eucharist).

Among those who stood surveying the damage on that afternoon of February 2 was the Cathedral's pastor,

Monsignor William Noonan. The Monsignor (so the story goes, and it is well authenticated), fearful about how the Protestant establishment of the city might interpret this cataclysmic event at the Catholic Cathedral, turned to Bill O'Connell, the editor of the diocesan newspaper, the *Progress*, and cautioned him: "now Willum, not a word of this to the press!"

Of course the word did get to the press, and all the local papers carried the story the next day—in fact, the dome collapse made headlines as far south as Portland!

In the vivid journalistic language of the day, the *P-I* reported: "Viewed from within, the beautiful building of Italian Renaissance architecture looked like the scenes of destruction wrought by the cannons in Belgium.... The blizzard poured its white clouds and rapidly drifts began to sift over sacred images and objects of great beauty in bronze and onyx and marble."

But the press was sympathetic to the tremendous loss the Catholic community had sustained—estimated at \$75,000, a staggering amount of money in 1916. The great snow took at least one life—that of a man shoveling snow off a roof downtown, who fell through a skylight—and a number of buildings suffered damage, including the West Seattle Christian Church and the old natatorium at Alki. "The white menace leveled its silent and interminable attack without cessation all day and night," reported the *P-I*. "Beleaguered, Seattle fought its relentless and insidious enemy... and in the end admitted defeat."

—Corinna Laughlin

In our next issue: Bishop O'Dea Rebuilds