

## **The Cathedral: Curiosity or Crossroads?**

### **Cathedral Ministry Conference**

**Salt Lake City, January 8, 2013**

When you think of Seattle, I'm willing to bet it's rain you think of, not snow, but on the second of February, 1916, snow was the story in Seattle. In just 20 hours a record-breaking 40 inches brought the city to a standstill and it also brought the mighty 40 foot high dome which sat high atop St. James Cathedral crashing into the heart of the cathedral, smashing pulpit, communion railing, statuary, and every bit of glass in the great arched windows, and sending heavy oak pews flying in every direction like unruly Lincoln logs.

Seattle wasn't a very Catholic town in those days. It still isn't! Only eight years earlier, in December of 1907, the local Protestant establishment had wondered mightily who those upstart Catholics thought they were when they completed work on the huge Italian Renaissance temple that dominated the city from high atop Seattle's First Hill and dedicated it to St. James the Apostle. The cathedral was out of proportion to the city, to the skyline, to all the other downtown churches and, most of all, it was out of proportion to the fairly insignificant Catholic population.

The pastor of St. James Cathedral on that snowy February day was a no-nonsense Irishman by the name of William Noonan. He had the "flannel mouth" (my father's way of describing the Irish brogue) and the commanding ways of the Irish cleric who had made good. And if there was one thing he was leery about it was Protestants. As the story goes, and it is well authenticated, the shock of the dome's collapse, great though it was, wasn't so great as to cause the good Monsignor to let down his guard. Fearful about how the Protestant establishment of the city might read this cataclysmic event at the Catholic cathedral, he sent for Bill O'Connell, an assistant at the diocesan newspaper, *The*

*Catholic Northwest Progress*, and carefully cautioned him, “now Willum, not a word of this to the press!”

Well, despite Monsignor Noonan’s stern warning, the word did get to the press. The next day the story of the collapse of the cathedral’s dome was on the front page of all three Seattle dailies complete with pictures of the nave of the cathedral piled high with the snow-covered rubble of the dome: brick and glass, copper and terra cotta. Happily, none of the papers was so indelicate as to suggest that the catastrophe might have been, in the parlance of the insurance industry, an “act of God!”

And, with or without Monsignor Noonan’s permission, the members of “the press” continued to find their way to St. James Cathedral--as well they should have. They were there to report on the fund raising for the rebuilding, and for the reopening a year-and-a-half later when the cathedral, phoenix-like, rose from its own ashes, but absent its once crowning glory, the dome.

And I think it’s safe to say that the press has never stopped finding its way to St. James Cathedral because – like all cathedrals – like your cathedrals--it was not meant to be a low-profile place in the city. Cathedrals have always tended to be high-profile: the focal point of a city’s life and landscape. Architecturally they have always stood out both for their size and their beauty – earthly icons of the heavenly city. And historically they have also stood out because of the role they have played in the life of the city as the pre-eminent gathering place for prayer, but also, in a sense, a city’s “Town Hall.” The great cathedrals were places of prayer but they were also places where people came to learn, to engage in public discourse, to celebrate the arts, and even to engage in commerce (witness, for instance, the market places which weekly go up around many of the great cathedrals of Germany on Saturday mornings even to this day).

But what about Cathedrals today? The poet Philip Larkin would have us believe that Cathedrals are mere curiosities, a sign of what people used to do, used to believe.

*I wonder...*

*When churches will fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?*

Well, we who are involved in Cathedral ministry dare to differ. And this morning, I want to tell you why. We differ because we see our Cathedrals as vital places, not unlucky places. They are crossroads. They are uniquely privileged places for an encounter between Church and City, between sacred and secular, between believers and unbelievers. If I've learned one thing in twenty-five years of Cathedral ministry, it's that this encounter that happens in our Cathedrals is not something we should be shy about ("not a word to the press!"), but something that we should be eager to promote, to broadcast, to tell the world. In this talk I'll argue that our cathedrals are "bully pulpits" with a message not only for the Catholic community, but for people who are anything—and everything!—but Catholic.

There is, of course, an *obvious* sense in which cathedrals are bully pulpits. Let me use my own cathedral as an example. Over the years, it has been a high-profile bully pulpit for bishops who saw their role as intersecting with the needs,

life, and conscience of the larger community. I think, for instance, of Bishop Gerald Shaughnessy, an otherwise un-notable leader in Seattle during the 1930's and '40s who made a name for himself the day in 1941 when he climbed into the pulpit of St. James in order to denounce the American wartime alliance with Great Britain ("Perfidious Albion," he dared to call our English allies, quoting Napoleon, and remaining true to his Irish heritage that made him certain that the English were under no circumstances ever to be trusted!). Clearly, popular sentiment was not with the bishop and the next issue of *Time* magazine branded him the "goat bearded bishop of Seattle"). Shaughnessy, to my mind at least, later redeemed himself when he mounted that same pulpit following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in order to denounce the warehousing of Japanese American citizens in the shameful internment camps of Idaho and California. His was a fairly lonely voice in a city that has always prided itself - and still prides itself -- on its tolerance....

A couple of decades later, another bishop (actually an Archbishop since Seattle had been 'elevated' by then) by the name of Thomas Connolly, the son of a San Francisco Irish cop, a scrappy, fearless Irishman if ever there was one -- a man who was never afraid of throwing around the weight of his episcopal office -- used the pulpit of St. James to taunt the mayor of the city for his waffling ways with regard to an open housing ordinance in Seattle. Connolly regarded the mayor's hesitation as cowardice at best and racism at worst and he railed at him for his unwillingness to speak out.

Ten years after that, it was yet another Seattle Archbishop, Raymond Hunthausen, who more than once took to the pulpit of St. James Cathedral to denounce, in his mild, unassuming, but quietly passionate and prophetic manner, the nuclear arms race and to announce that, so immoral did he regard the wholesale hemorrhage of money from the federal treasury in support of weapons of mass destruction that he felt compelled to withhold one-half of his

income taxes as a protest. And he went further, pointing his finger across Seattle's harbor to the nuclear submarine base just across the sound, daring to call that bastion of national defense -- and feeder of the local economy -- "the Auschwitz of Puget Sound."

Agree or disagree with those episcopal voices it's hard to deny that they were doing anything but carrying on in the grand tradition of cathedrals throughout the ages. It's no different today, although after the recent election, which gave us some examples of bishops making effective and not-so-effective use of bully pulpits across the country with regard to a variety of issues, some of us may feel a bit wary -- like Monsignor Noonan -- of an unsympathetic press and public. But, like it or not, our Cathedrals *are* bully pulpits.

**And now I want to speak about some more subtle ways in which our cathedrals are bully pulpits -- subtle because our cities, unlike those of the Middle Ages, have become secular cities, and this makes our role more challenging. Seattle is a good case in point. (I think of it as the capital of "Unchurchia.")** Today's secular environment, while tolerant of religion to a point (political correctness demands *some* level of tolerance, after all!) tends to look upon religion and its visible expressions with the eyes of the eighteenth century Enlightenment -- that is to say, with very suspicious eyes. At best, religion and its institutions are a curious kind of poetry and, at worst, a harmful set of superstitions. Religious beliefs and creeds belong safely inside the walls of churches -- the thicker the better -- and well outside the public domain unless, perhaps, for purposes of historical study. The secular mind, as we all know only too well, views theistic spirituality and Christian spirituality in particular as something highly privatized and esoteric, tolerable at the fringes of society but

having nothing really important to say at its center. That was the view of the Enlightenment and it continues to enjoy a good deal of currency today.

And it is a point of view, of course, that logically eliminates precious “turf” which cathedrals have traditionally claimed as their own. It is this turf that our cathedrals need to make a try at taking back. It’s a fairly bold agenda, but it can work. **So now I would like to offer four ways in which our Cathedrals can be “bully pulpits” in our secular cities, preaching, if you will, to people who, I’d venture to guess, would never voluntarily listen to a sermon from a pulpit.** Again, I’m going to use my cathedral to illustrate my points, but I hope you will think of your cathedrals.

**(1) The first way involves finding a way in our secular cities to speak to people for whom God is simply not part of the equation – people for whom God is either non-existent or irrelevant.** For them, a cathedral (or any church, for that matter) is a curiosity, an anachronism, an “emblem of a lost world” to borrow someone’s phrase: a quaint, if interesting, relic from the past, about as relevant to today’s scene as a quill pen, an abacus, or a typewriter. These people may find their way into a cathedral but only as a museum of memories and mysteries. A cathedral might be “a nice place to visit, but you surely wouldn’t want to live there!”

Here the challenge is to take something that grew out of a world that admittedly no longer exists – the medieval world where daily life and church life were so closely woven together that they were nearly one and the same – and somehow make it fit a very different world. This challenge came home to me very clearly and pointedly on a recent visit to the great cathedral of Chartres in the countryside just outside Paris. Whatever else might be said about that powerful statement in stone, that defining masterpiece of gothic architecture, one quickly realizes that it was and still is the very heart, the undisputed center of

gravity of that old town. In its towering magnificence it is almost indistinguishable from the town that huddles around it, and any road you take will lead you to it.

But in post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment, post-Revolution (and, many would say, post-Christian) France, even the great cathedral of Chartres represents a lost world. But that can work in its favor – in our favor, because people today love lost worlds. They pay big bucks to travel across the world to see and explore lost worlds. One of the reasons hundreds of thousands of people stream up the hill to Chartres each year is that they long for a lost world that seems to possess something that is missing from the world in which they now live their lives. Call it nostalgia if you want, but I prefer to think of it as a search for the beautiful in a too functional world.

What I'm suggesting is that a cathedral can still work its magic even in a hostile or indifferent world, for part of a cathedral's magic lies in the way it is able to present the beautiful. Medieval towns had no symphony halls, opera houses, theaters, or museums. They had cathedrals. Today we have all five and we are the better for it. But cathedrals are still places where people have a unique opportunity to meet the beautiful – whether in architecture, art, or music – because cathedrals can make the beautiful available to everyone regardless of their ability to afford it, to pay for it. You can come to a cathedral and simply take without giving. We are, of course, grateful to those who choose to give, but we always welcome those who don't or who can't. I like the way the great contemporary Italian architect, Mario Botta, expresses this. He speaks of opera houses, symphony halls, and theaters as “places of the collective imagination...people buy tickets to go there and dream,” he says. That fits nicely with what one of our homeless parishioners once told me about St. James: “I come here to get lost,” she said.

Now I am not claiming that my own cathedral is great architecture (I'd settle for good) but, like yours, I'm sure, St. James does house some certifiably important and fine art. And our critically-acclaimed music program presents in concert all year long - quite outside the liturgical services and celebrations - a rich menu of many of the great masterpieces of sacred music as well as some impressive newly-commissioned works by noteworthy composers. All are welcome whether they make a monetary offering or not. For me, this is a way, a very important way, for the cathedral to claim its traditional turf in a world far removed from its medieval roots. It is a way that a cathedral, by finding its voice, can speak to those who might think it has nothing much to say. It's a subtle, "soft sell" approach to preaching the Christian gospel - one that I find utterly Catholic - in the sense that if God is Beauty Itself (and that is surely our belief), then every human expression of beauty puts a person in contact with the Divine, whether or not the person knows it.

**(2) The second way our cathedrals are bully pulpits. They speak to people who believe in God and who relate in some way to God but not to the church. Any church.** Their experience of God tends to be direct, immediate, and internal, 'vertical' and largely unmediated. Or if there is some mediation it is certainly not provided by a flawed human institution like the church. Maybe a sunset or a seascape or mountain-top, maybe a symphony or even a great structure like Notre Dame of Paris, but no hierarchy, please, and no standing committees, no stilted services and no collection basket. (I'm reminded of a woman friend of mine who said to me, after walking through Notre Dame, "I find God in there in some way, but I'm not interested in staying for a service.")

And I believe a cathedral can speak to these folks - in somewhat the same way as it can to those who have no belief whatever in God. If we do our work well, cathedrals can become urban mountain-tops, if you will -- holy places

whose towering architecture and art can offer a place of solemn, quiet peace – so much so that people might even be tempted to “stay for a service”, and even if they don’t we will still have given them something worthwhile as they claim a zone of peace and serenity in the midst of a noisy and often crazy city. Nearly every time I walk into our cathedral at any hour of the day I find people there – all kinds of people – many, I’m sure, not carrying Catholic passports – people all the way from bankers to bag ladies – lost in some quiet corner, sitting behind a pillar, or kneeling in a shrine amid flickering candles, and I know that the cathedral is serving a good and worthy purpose.

**(3) The third way. Cathedrals also have an opportunity to speak to people whose primary experience of God is through people, human relationships, service to the poor, and the like. These people might be called ‘horizontalists’ (if the others are ‘verticalists’).** They have at least one thing in common with the ‘verticalists’: both share a deep distrust of institutions. The only way for the cathedral to speak to them (and they are many) is for it to be able to justify its bricks and mortar, its marble and bronze, its gold and glass. “Why this waste?” is their big question – little knowing, I think, where that question came from: not from some enlightened or radical apostle of the “Social Gospel,” of course, but right from St. John’s Gospel where it appears on the lips of Jesus’ betrayer...!). I believe that any attempt at answering that question on the part of the cathedral is persuasive only if we can establish for people a connection between worship and service, a connection between the worship we do inside the cathedral’s walls and the loving service we do outside.

This brings me to say a word about the role of social outreach programs in the life of a cathedral. At St. James we spend a large portion of our annual operating budget (approximately 20 %), and we enlist countless hours on the part of a large and incredibly diverse cadre of volunteers (more than 800,

currently), to respond to the human and social service needs of many needy people in the heart of our city. I think of our Cathedral Kitchen, serving dinner to nearly 200 poor and homeless people five nights a week; of our large and highly-respected English as a Second Language Program for immigrants and refugees; of our overnight shelter for homeless men; of our drop-in and referral center that connects people with basic social services and provide things like IDs and bus passes; of our new Mental Health Ministry, co-sponsored by the Order of Malta. I think, too, of the Hunthausen Fund, an innovative program for rent assistance which gets people out of shelters and into permanent housing; of the approximately \$140,000 collected at the cathedral doors over the course of a year and given out by our St. Vincent de Paul Society to help people pay their rent and utilities and buy groceries; and of a number of other outreach programs which not only serve the poor but advocate for their needs and their rights.

Ironically, some time ago, the *Seattle Times*, in an editorial about the closing of a prominent Protestant church not far from the cathedral, commented on how sad it was that a congregation like that one, committed to social outreach and service, only succeeded in driving many of the congregants away because of the kinds of people who came to receive social services. Apparently, the people didn't mind footing the bill for social services, but got uncomfortable with the people they were serving, and fled the scene. The St. James experience has been quite different. Social outreach has actually brought an influx of people to St. James – a large influx – not only people who come to receive important social services, but also many who come to help provide them and to pay for them.

At the base of the oculus high above the altar of St. James written very large are the Last Supper words of Christ which make inescapably clear this connection between worship and service: *I AM IN YOUR MIDST AS ONE WHO SERVES*. It's a way of reminding all of us that the services we celebrate *inside* the cathedral with such solemnity get their fullest meaning only when they translate

into services we offer *outside* the cathedral--in all those messy places where people live their lives!

**(4) The fourth and last way our cathedrals can preach to the unchurched is by becoming as the community's gathering place - the entire community's gathering place - at times when the community badly needs to gather, and when a public gathering place (a city square or a park or a stadium) just won't do.** During the years I have been at St. James, people representing all the major religions (Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist), and a few of the lesser ones, as well as people who identify with no religion at all, have gathered in the cathedral in great numbers when they felt the need to be together, to pray together, to weep, to mourn, to listen, to ponder, to offer support, to gain resolve, wisdom, and courage.

They came by the thousands on the eve of the Gulf War in 1991, and they came in great numbers – as I'm sure they did to your cathedrals – in the wake of the terrible events of September 11, 2001, and on the anniversary one year later. They came when our city was devastated by the tragic deaths of four firefighters, killed one night in an arson-caused warehouse fire; they came when Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, when Mother Teresa died, when the Oklahoma Federal Building was bombed, when a devastating earthquake shook Japan, and when high school kids were mowed down at Columbine, and college kids at Virginia Tech. Most recently, they came when those twenty beautiful first graders were so tragically massacred at Newtown.

They came not always for Mass, because that limits the participation of non-Catholics, but for ecumenical and interfaith services. They came because they wanted to and needed to. They came not for any answers we could provide but for comfort and assurance, challenge and perspective and – I can find no other way of saying it – they came for a human experience of the Divine. That is

what cathedrals have always given and it is what our cathedrals must always try their best to give.

I really believe that our cathedrals can be at the heart of the new evangelization, as we celebrate and share the riches of our tradition, offering a place of beauty and comfort, but also a place to encounter and talk about faith.

I have a favorite cathedral story which dates from the seventeenth century – from the time when Sir Christopher Wren was overseeing the building of his great masterpiece, St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, after the disastrous fire of 1666. One day Wren disguised himself and went into the workshop to see how the workers were getting on. He found three of them there, all doing the same job, cutting and smoothing and preparing the stone. He asked the first, “What are you doing?”, and the fellow said to him, “I am chipping bits off this stone until it’s two feet by three feet by six. And a very boring job it is, too.” And then he asked the second, “What are you doing?”, and he replied, “I’m earning a few pence a day and it’s very little when you’ve a wife and six children to feed.” And when he asked the third the same question, he told him, “Ah, I’m a lucky chap. I’m helping a fellow by the name of Christopher Wren to build a great cathedral!”

That little story captures something of what I believe about cathedrals. It takes different sorts of people to create a cathedral and there is certainly more than one way to view a cathedral, and even to understand it. Like any work of art it is multi-layered, and like many human enterprises, it can serve more than one purpose. Some, like Wren’s stone-cutters, never get past the trees to see the whole forest. No matter. They see something. And for those really willing to look and to search, there is a greatness to be discovered in a cathedral and a whole world of opportunities to be explored. Cathedrals realize a few of those opportunities, I like to think, but only a few, and I know a cathedral will lose its

soul the day it thinks it has realized them all. For cathedrals, like so many other human enterprises, are works in progress, unfinished symphonies. Like the God they are meant to image and honor, they defy easy definition and they never run out of possibilities. Place of worship, icon of the heavenly city, bully pulpit, center for the sacred arts, center for social services, crossroads for conversation and controversy, ecumenical center. The cathedral is all these and more. With all due respect to my esteemed predecessor, Monsignor (“not a word to the press”) Noonan, he got it wrong. If we in cathedral ministry are doing the job we are supposed to do, we probably ought to blow our horns now and again – and, yes, ring our bells – and do everything we possibly can to get “the word to the press!” – and get the message, the Gospel, to the people.