

CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

Issue #15

August 5, 2007

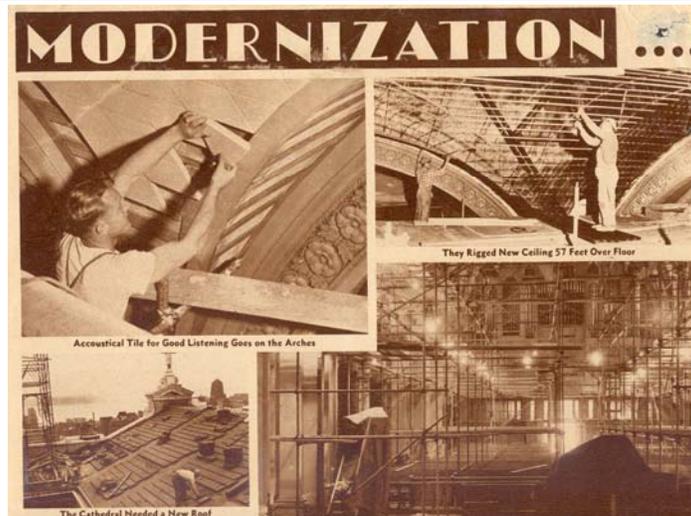
1950: THE CATHEDRAL “MODERNIZED”

When Bishop Thomas A. Connolly arrived in Seattle from his native San Francisco in 1948, St. James Cathedral was not at its best. The interior was musty and old-fashioned. No improvements or alterations had been made to the building since the Great Depression, and much-needed upgrades had been put off from year to year. The exterior of the Cathedral was dark and weather-beaten, and it is said that in some places you could easily pull bricks out of the walls.

The new Coadjutor Bishop of Seattle was itching to renovate the Cathedral, but he began by remodeling the Cathedral Rectory—a task he undertook within a few months of his arrival in Seattle. Paul Thiry, who would later become the principal architect of the 1962 World’s Fair, added the third story, and built the annex on the north side of the building to house a community of Dominican sisters, who for the next decade would serve as housekeepers for the priests in residence at the Cathedral (the old convent now houses the music office and the Cathedral bookstore).

The celebration of the Centennial of the Diocese of Seattle in 1950 offered Bishop Connolly the opportunity he needed for the overhaul of the Cathedral itself. He hired the Rambusch Decorating Company of New York to re-envision the building. And re-envision it they did. The exterior was thoroughly cleaned, probably for the first time in the building’s history, and, the *Progress* reported, “the Cathedral’s stately twin towers gleam again with restored warm tones of the cream-colored brick.” The niches on the west façade, which had hitherto been empty, were filled with statues carved from Indiana limestone, representing St. John Vianney, St. Frances Cabrini, and St. James. A new black and gold window was installed on the west façade. The window, with its bold imagery of Christ, flanked by a fisherman and a lumberjack, was a striking image of the Church in the modern world, and a clear reflection of the modern outlook of Bishop Connolly.

The interior was more dramatically altered. Out went the old 1917 reredos behind the high altar, and in went a new ambo, altar rail, choir stalls, stations of the



The Cathedral underwent its second major renovation in 1950, in honor of the Centennial of the Diocese of Seattle.

cross, and much, much more. The terrazzo flooring was covered with carpeting—green in the sanctuary, rust and rose in the aisles. A new ceiling was hung, covered in acoustical tile (“for good listening,” reported the *Progress*), painted with brightly colored designs in blue and green. An immense, neo-Baroque reredos was installed in the East Apse, with two larger-than-life gold angels flanking a dramatic image of St. James the Apostle.

Massive oak confessionals were placed in the west aisles, with green studded doors, and special acoustical lining to ensure privacy. All the interior doors of the Cathedral were of studded red leather, to emphasize, explained the *Progress*, “the transition from the noise of the outer world to the silence and meditation of the inner world.”

The Chapel, too, was entirely redone. The great window on the east wall was plastered over, and the Renaissance altarpiece (which had been hanging in the baptistry) was placed above the altar. Surrounding the painting were three large carved groups, representing Our Lady of Lourdes (with Bernadette and the miraculous stream), Our Lady of Fatima (with the three shepherd children and the miracle of the sun), and the crowning of Mary by the holy Trinity.

And that was not all. Heating and light systems were improved, the sacristies were upgraded, and even the Cathedral basement was overhauled, creating a choir rehearsal area, and vesting areas for altar servers and visiting priests: a model of modern liturgical efficiency.

The redecorated St. James Cathedral was a “Triumph of Breath-Taking Beauty,” reported the *Progress*, and Bishop Connolly was satisfied with the work that had been done. “My God,” he was heard to say as the doors opened for the Centenary Mass of Thanksgiving: “it’s magnificent.” And so it was: a perfect reflection of the liturgical and artistic tastes of the day, and a sign that the new Bishop was prepared to lead the Church of Western Washington into the modern age.

—Corinna Laughlin