

# CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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## 1968: YEAR OF CONTRADICTION

On the evening of Sunday, January 21, 1968, a milestone event took place at St. James Cathedral. As part of the observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, leaders from many Christian denominations, including the Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, and Congregational Churches, joined Archbishop Connolly and Bishop Gill in the Cathedral sanctuary. The men and women of the First Baptist Church Choir sang, while the Cathedral's own organist, George Fiore, was at the console. Reverend J. Benner Weaver, the pastor of Gethsemane Lutheran, became the first Protestant minister to speak from the pulpit of St. James Cathedral. "The wind of God is moving through his Church," he said to the assembly of 1,500 who gathered for this historic event, "bringing into closer fellowship many of the parts of a fragmented Christian body." The unity of Christians seemed to be just around the corner.

Less than three weeks later came another milestone. Seattle's Catholic Interracial Council hosted the first Interfaith Civil Rights Banquet at the Seattle Center. More than two thousand purchased tickets (including the Holy Names Sisters of the Cathedral Convent, who recorded the event in their Chronicle). Bishop Harold Perry, Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans and—at that time—the only African American Catholic bishop in the United States, was the principal speaker. "The struggles for justice on earth," he said, "turn out to be not merely personal feuds between man and man.... It is God's cause every time, since each time it is God's plan for mankind that is at stake." That evening, Archbishop Connolly was presented with an award acknowledging his outstanding work on behalf of Seattle's minorities. He used the occasion to excoriate local leaders (especially Mayor Braman, notably absent from the gathering) for their failure to support open housing initiatives. "I would counsel our mayor not to tremble in his boots," he said scornfully. And he added, "We want open housing legislation with teeth in it." The gathering was unprecedented in Seattle and the mood was hopeful. Civil rights for ethnic minorities seemed to be just around the corner.

And then, on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. The response was immediate and overwhelming. Race riots broke out in more than 60 cities, while in other places, including Seattle, people responded with prayer. On the afternoon of April 7, Palm Sunday, people gathered to pray at St. James and dozens of other Seattle churches, and then



Prayer for Christian Unity at St. James Cathedral, January 21, 1968. In the front row are pastors of Seattle's Plymouth Congregational, First Baptist, Gethsemane Lutheran, and First Methodist Churches.

marched silently to the Seattle Center for a memorial service. Ten thousand people gathered at the Center that day to honor Dr. King. Governor Evans spoke, and Archbishop Connolly gave the concluding benediction, urging those assembled to remain true to Dr. King's principles of non-violence.

That same day, in Rome, Pope Paul VI broke with tradition by speaking at some length about Dr. King at the conclusion of his Palm Sunday homily. "May this execrable crime take on the value of a sacrifice," he said. "May it not be hatred, or vendetta, or a new abyss between the citizens of that great and noble country, but rather a new common purpose of pardon, of peace, of reconciliation.... Weeping and yet hoping, we pray that it may indeed be so." Dr. King was also mentioned in the General Intercessions—newly restored to the liturgy as part of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. "That the sacrifice of Martin Luther King may not remain in vain, but that through it the souls of all may be opened more widely in forgiveness and reconciliation, we pray to the Lord."

Ironically, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been scheduled to address the National Liturgical Conference, a Catholic organization, at their 29th annual meeting on August 19-21, 1968. The theme of the conference was "Revolution: Christian Responses." We can only wonder what words he would have addressed to this gathering of Catholic clergy, religious, and lay faithful. But it is clear that Catholics, in Seattle and throughout the nation, had embraced one of the basic teachings of the Second Vatican Council: that the Church and its worship could not be divorced from the struggles and the anguish of the world in which we live.

—Corinna Laughlin