

# CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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## A LIVING CATHEDRAL

When Archbishop Hunthausen appointed Father Michael G. Ryan pastor of St. James Cathedral in July, 1988, he gave him a special mandate: to restore the beauty of this historic church, and to renovate it in light of the Second Vatican Council.

Discussions of the Cathedral renovation had actually begun many years before. In 1981, the idea was broached both in the Cathedral Parish Council and in various Archdiocesan committees, but it was decided to postpone the project. As the years went by, however, the need for renovation became more urgent. That urgency was both practical and theological. On the practical level, the Cathedral was in need of major work on systems like light and heat. Accessibility for wheelchairs was a major problem, and safety was a concern, too, as the previous renovations of the building, in 1916 and 1950, had not made any provisions for earthquakes.

But the theological urgency was still greater. While the Cathedral was a beautiful and well-loved building, its arrangement and décor spoke to an outdated idea of the church and of the people of God. The altar was located in the east apse, and the large sanctuary was separated from the nave by a heavy altar rail of marble and brass, and by what was commonly called “the moat.” The seating for the people stretched clear to the back of the Cathedral—a distance of almost a full city block! From the transepts, the altar could not be seen. The Cathedral’s arrangement said more clearly than words possibly could that the assembly was essentially an *audience* for the sacred rites, performed for them by the priests in the far-off sanctuary.

But the Second Vatican Council had taught that it was not just the priest but the entire assembly who offered the Mass, and the “full, conscious, and active participation” of the faithful in the liturgy was the principal goal of the liturgical reforms (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 14). The people in the pews were not spectators, but a royal priesthood offering to God the sacrifice of prayer. During the late 1980s, bishops, priests and people became more than ever aware that St. James Cathedral—in its present configuration—was not really reflecting the Council’s vision of the dignity of the people of God.

On November 28, 1990, a few days after the feast of Christ the King, Archbishop Hunthausen, Archbishop Murphy, and Father Ryan published a letter to parishioners of the Cathedral, announcing the decision to move ahead at last with this long-awaited project. In their letter, they recalled Bishop O’Dea and Archbishop



Mass in the Cathedral, 1970s

Connolly, both of whom had demonstrated great courage and foresight in building—and rebuilding—a cathedral church that reflected the hopes and aspirations of the Church of their time. The letter also made it clear that the cathedral building itself was only part of the picture.

“The people are first and foremost the church. For this reason, any renovation that takes place at St. James Cathedral will need to be far more than a matter of bricks and mortar. At its deepest level, the renovation will need to involve the renewal of all of us who are the People of God. The sacramental celebrations that take place in a renovated Cathedral will help to form us into that renewed people but we must also open ourselves to being renewed by the Spirit of God even as we begin to engage in the project itself. In other words, we see the Cathedral renovation project as a spiritual undertaking every bit as much as a material one.”

During the months—and years—that followed, there would be dozens of committee meetings and community gatherings, and countless consultations with artists and architects, liturgists, theologians, historians, and so many others. Little by little a new vision of St. James Cathedral began to emerge. And the more the community talked about what the Cathedral should *look* like, the more they came to an awareness of what a Cathedral *is*: a house for the Church, the people of God.

—Corinna Laughlin

*In our next issue: The Renovation is underway! The ideas that took shape (and a few that didn't). Our Centennial Year is drawing to a close, and so is the Gazette! Read past issues at [www.stjames-cathedral.org/centennial](http://www.stjames-cathedral.org/centennial).*