

125 Years: “Unless the Lord Build the House”

- Mass of the Holy Spirit
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“Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it.” It is for this reason that we start each year with the Mass of the Holy Spirit, asking God to build, with us as co-workers, the house, which we will inhabit in this academic year and the personal home in each student of his education, of her formation, of their growth, of our spirituality and faith.

You can trace the 125-year history of Seattle University by the chapels and churches in which these Masses of the Holy Spirit have taken place. Fr. Garrand, the Jesuit founder of Seattle University, celebrated the first Mass of the Holy Spirit in a makeshift chapel on the second floor of a little school at Sixth and Spring which they called Immaculate Conception Church. Doors opened for 90 children, boys and girls, grade school and high school, in what was named Immaculate Conception School. That’s where our university was born, in that parish hall, at that Mass, with that school; there we first asked God to build our house. A very humble beginning.

In 1894 the Mass of the Holy Spirit was celebrated in the brand new building, which we call the Garrand Building, in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which occupied the top two red-brick floors of the building which had a grand staircase sloping directly to Broadway. The new school’s church was operatic, with sumptuous ornamentation of statues, niches, pillars, and altars outshining anything else in Seattle. The Jesuits were making a statement about their new school—and hopefully they were not boasting in vain for the Lord was building, with their help, what would eventually be called Seattle Prep and Seattle University.

The third place for an academic year’s Mass of the Holy Spirit was right here in this church in 1904. Seattle College was filling out and taking over the Garrand Building, so the Jesuits built and opened this parish church and came to live here and to walk over to Garrand to teach and to run Seattle College. In 1904 there still not had been any college graduates from the school; that was still five years away. If you look around this 112-year-old church you can get a feel for those days, it has not changed all that much.

God had built a great church, but how was God doing with the college? Not that well. The school began gradually to flounder till a friend of the Jesuits, T.C. McHugh, bought the defunct Swedish Baptist school called Adelpia Hall over where Seattle Prep is on the other end of Capitol Hill. In a chapel in that building the tradition of the Mass of the Holy Spirit at the start of each year continued without a break, even though for four years there were no college students at all. I have to confess that the chapel the Jesuits developed there was not the Baptist chapel already in the building—they probably thought it would be sacrilege to use it—they converted the Baptist chapel into the school’s first gym! Nice going Jesuits! Still, somehow, God was building the school while others labored along with God.

Then the revived college division of the school came back to First Hill and to the Garrard Building. The building had been gutted by fire, the ornate chapel on the top floors completely destroyed and never rebuilt, so the Mass of the Holy Spirit came back here where we are today. Really, this is our true college church and that is why we are here today.

If we jump ahead a bit to the late 1960s, there was a new spirit blowing in the wind. Mass for the university moved to the top floor of the Administration Building, what was then called the Liberal Arts Building. In the northern wing of that floor of the building, where the library had been before it was emptied and carted over to Lemieux Library, long-haired students in large numbers sprawled on the carpet of the make-shift chapel for Mass with very hip young Jesuit priests, also long-haired, as they swayed to religious folk music amid wild-colored banners proclaiming peace and love. It was a far cry from earlier chapels and rituals. But still, somehow, God was building the house with whatever materials God was being given. That's what God does.

In the 1980s, when I first came here to Seattle U, though the Mass of the Holy Spirit was held in this church, or sometimes in the Cathedral, or once in the Quadrangle—a mistake—Masses on campus were nearly clandestine, hidden events. The university was not allowed to build its own chapel, so windowless chapels in Campion, Bellarmine, and Xavier served the purpose and Jesuits led Masses in their living rooms on the floors of the residence halls. Maybe God, in building the house of our university, was integrating worship into the fabric of the university and of the student life.

At last the university was given permission and ran triumphantly with it, designing the exquisite, contemporary, architecturally renowned, Chapel of St. Ignatius, filled with light and colors playing over its sculpted, curved walls; a place of Mass, of prayer, of quiet worship, of sacred song, reflecting the spirituality of the students of Seattle U of today. The Chapel of St. Ignatius reflects the larger house of the university, which God has built over these 125 years while so many co-workers did not labor in vain. In a similar way the beautiful contemporary Chapel of Our Lady of Monserrat at Seattle Prep is an image for the spirit and soul of that Jesuit school which shares our history from the beginning but is less our twin and more like our older brother.

It's a wonderful history and an interesting one. 125 years in a row of Masses of the Holy Spirit in so many different halls, chapels, churches, open spaces, buildings, and so many changing modes in which Masses have been celebrated by Jesuits with ever-changing students on our campuses. Through all these changes, could there possibly have been the unbroken thread and yet the varied tapestry, if God had not been present working with us as God will be there with us for the future? Our history and our commitment each year to ask for God's Holy Spirit to bless our year is some small proof not only of God's existence but of God's loving presence with us.

One final thought for each of us to ponder. We've talked about chapels and churches, but more important to God is that each of us is a temple where God dwells and where God builds. Perhaps the story of our own personal temple—our own life, faith, soul, and spirituality—is as varied, as unpredictable, as changing as those sacred spaces one after the other at a hall, an ornate chapel, this church, a chapel on the other end of the hill, this church again, a wing of a classroom building, windowless chapels in residence halls, and a wonderful evocative, new welcoming

sacred chapel. Let's take a moment in this church of our common history as a University and a secondary school to be aware of, and to be grateful for, our own personal history of God dwelling in us and building something beautiful and sacred of us.