



*The Cathedral Foundation, Inc.,
Thomas More College,
and Northern Kentucky University
present*

The Ninth Annual Stolberg Lecture
**The Role of the Urban Cathedral in Twenty-First
Century America**



“The Cathedral: Curiosity or Crossroads?”

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Seattle, Washington**

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For the past eight years I have eagerly awaited and then dutifully devoured the booklet with the annual Stolberg Lecture -- learning, stretching, borrowing -- but never for a moment picturing myself in the pantheon of distinguished presenters; certainly never imagining that my number would ever come up in the mystical lottery by which the presenters are chosen. My surprise when I received the letter inviting me to give this year's lecture was equaled only by my trepidation at the thought of accepting. But I did and, at least at this moment, I am happy I did because I was forced to step back somewhat from the day to day demands of cathedral ministry in order to search for words that might begin to make sense of it all.

Cathedrals *as parishes* make sense in the way that every parish makes sense, but cathedrals *as cathedrals*: do they make sense? And how do they make sense? Thus my questioning title (and it is a question, not a statement) for this lecture: *The Cathedral: Curiosity or Crossroads?*

As I begin, allow me to express sincere gratitude to the Cathedral Foundation Board and Staff, to my friend and colleague, Father John Cahill, as well as to Thomas More College and Northern Kentucky University for the honor of this invitation and, yes, for forcing me to ask some questions I might otherwise never have asked.

When you think of Seattle, chances are 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 of seven hills to a standstill and it also brought the mighty 40' 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 certainly wondered mightily who these 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. *Monsignor* 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 in general (all those people I grew up hearing referred to as “non-Catholics”) and Presbyterians in particular (Irish Catholics do have their biases...). 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, the editor of 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 the 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 – it was never meant to be a low-profile place in the city. In fact, throughout history, as you know only too well, cathedrals have tended to be high-profile: often 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, if you will, of the heavenly city. And historically they have also stood out because of the role they played in the life of the city – the pre-eminent gathering place for prayer, but also, in a sense, the city’s “Town Hall.” For the 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).

It was in this tradition, over the years, that Seattle's Cathedral became something of a high-profile bully pulpit for bishops who rose beyond their denominational duties narrowly defined and began to see 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 the city 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 him and the next issue of *Time* magazine quickly 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. 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 and 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 or racism at worst and he railed at him for his unwillingness to speak out, preferring to hide within the safe confines of City Hall, "shaking in his boots" (Connolly's memorable description of His Honor).

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 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, he felt compelled to withhold a significant portion 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. Certainly, the bishop who built St. James, Edward O'Dea, had had this kind of powerful public presence in mind when he selected the site for his cathedral, setting it on a prominent piece of real estate high atop a hill overlooking the city, then going all the way back to New York in order to engage the services of prestigious architectural firm, Heins and LaFarge, whose other cathedral project at the time -- still under construction even as I speak tonight -- was none other than the great St. John the Divine in New York City.

One of the charges I received from Archbishop Hunthausen, when he sent me to serve as pastor of St. James in 1988, was to see that the work of Heins and LaFarge would last into the twenty-first century. For the cathedral was limping along at that time. It had been 40 years since any significant work other than cosmetic had been done on it. The cathedral's systems (mechanical, electrical, plumbing) were failing badly, its paint was peeling, its carpets (acres of Irish green carpeting!) were badly frayed and with its unreinforced masonry it was a sitting duck for a major earthquake. But not only was it a sitting duck, some, though not all, regarded it as something of an ugly duckling. It was dark and dowdy and a little bit tired, reflecting the taste of the late 1940's and early '50's. So one of my roles as pastor, the Archbishop told me, was to shore up this "bully pulpit" and let it shine again. But there was something more. As you well know, the Catholic church's watershed event had occurred in the 1960's: the Second Vatican Council; and the most visible sign of that bold parting of the waters -- the one that touched the life of every single Catholic -- was the fresh new life breathed into the Church by the Council's call for the wholesale reform of the liturgy. So here was an additional reason for renovating St. James: along with every other Catholic church it was ripe for the renewal required by a renewed liturgy.

But renewal and renovation were not necessarily welcome words in late 1980's and early 1990's Catholicism. In the twenty or more years since the Second Vatican Council's call for liturgical renewal, many sins had been committed in the name of renewal and renovation. Most, if not all of us here tonight, could recite stories of how pastors and parishes, with a holy, uncompromising zeal rivaling the Calvinist stripping of the altars at the time of the Protestant Reformation, had assaulted their sanctuaries: whitewashing them and purging them of statues, crucifixes, shrines, votive candles and ornamentation – all in an effort to emphasize the essentials of worship and to minimize the accidentals. But in Catholicism, that is a difficult distinction to draw because part of the Catholic genius has always been to use the tangible and the visible and the beautiful (art and craft and artifact -- accidentals to some) to put the believer in touch with the intangible, the invisible, and the all-beautiful God. In Catholic theology all of this flows logically and inevitably from the way we understand the Incarnation. Once God became human in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, all things human gained a new capacity to bear the divinity.

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, that is why Catholicism is almost defined by a passion for the tangible, the visible, and the beautiful. Think of this splendid cathedral basilica of Covington; think of the great cathedrals, monasteries and museums of Europe; think of the great treasury of sacred music – not all of it Catholic, of course, but arguably the lion's share. The Catholic tradition quite consciously elevates art beyond the accidental to the essential -- essential in the same sense as the human nature of Jesus is essential. Catholic preoccupation with art is a logical consequence of our belief in a God who became human and who, in so doing, breathed the divine spark into all things human and allowed the divine to be discovered in all things human.

The rush to renewal that had followed in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, with its unfortunate – and very un-Catholic – iconoclasm, made the task of renewing Seattle's cathedral both a theological and a political minefield. The venerable building needed to be adapted for the celebration of the reformed liturgy of Vatican II but it couldn't afford to lose its Catholic identity in the process. It needed to facilitate lay participation in the worship and foster a greater sense of human warmth and community, all the while preserving – through art and architecture – the transcendent beauty, grandeur

and awe that are hallmarks of Catholic worship as it has been celebrated down through the ages in Cathedral churches.

I hope I am not revealing too much bias when I make the claim that the charge I received from Archbishop Hunthausen to “shore up the bully pulpit of St. James” and to bring it into conformity with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, but to keep it Catholic, was successful beyond our highest hopes. The most persuasive evidence for this is not the number of awards – local, national, and even international – that the renovated St. James has received. The most persuasive evidence is the people, the large and incredibly diverse community that prays in St. James. The parish has nearly tripled in size in ten years (from 900 to 2600 households) but, more importantly, the people have formed a far more intentional community – more alive, more participative in liturgy, more aware of each other, and more committed to living the gospel call to serve in the name of Christ *outside* the walls of the cathedral.

If I had to point to one thing to account for this, it would be to the centrally placed altar and ambo which make it possible for both Word and Sacrament to exercise their full power to shape and form God’s holy people, and to build community. The architecture of St. James – classical, symmetrical, with the transept intersecting the nave precisely at its midpoint, made this arrangement almost inevitable. What wasn’t necessarily inevitable was the retaining of the specifically *Catholic* soul of the cathedral but I do believe that was achieved, too, by a careful and sensitive blending of much-loved old devotional art with important, new commissions by internationally renowned artists, and by an uncompromising insistence that the beautiful – in all its many expressions – be allowed to work its particular magic.

Of course, to look at the cathedral church from the perspective of the demands of the Catholic liturgy is to address only one of the purposes of a cathedral which, since the time of the Middle Ages, has always had a larger identity than simply a place of worship. This larger identity takes on some very unique challenges in a place like secular Seattle, undisputed capital of what I like to call “Unchurchia” (pardon the awkward but not altogether inept label!). The current secular environment -- in Seattle and elsewhere -- while tolerant of religion to a point (political correctness demands *some* level of tolerance, after all!) tends to look upon it 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, if I may generalize a bit further (I may as well since I've already started) 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 a place like St. James, or any cathedral, makes a try at taking back. It's a fairly bold agenda and it doesn't always work, but sometimes it does. So now I would like to offer four ways in which cathedrals can take back traditional turf. I will offer four different 'land claims', if you will. There could undoubtedly be more. I hope you will pardon me for using St. James to illustrate my points.

(1) The first land claim involves a cathedral's effort to find ways 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 of faith 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.

A far cry that is from Seattle's First Hill, even though early photographs of St. James which show it hovering Chartres-like over the town might lead one to believe otherwise. But let me stay with Chartres for a moment longer. 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 maybe that can turn out to be a point of entry 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.

So 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, happily, 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 St. James is great architecture (I'd settle for good) but 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 land claim. Cathedrals also try to speak to people who believe in God and who relate in some way to God but not to the church. Any church. Many of these people are 'privatists' or isolationists. 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 (Pacific Northwesterners are especially given to those), maybe a symphony or even a great structure like Notre Dame of Paris, but no hierarchy, please, and no standing committees, and no stilted services. (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'd certainly never stay for a service.")

Again I believe a cathedral can claim some turf with these folks – in somewhat the same way as it can with 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 land claim. 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 we can call the others ‘verticalists’). They have at least one thing in common with the ‘verticalists,’ however: 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” 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 people come to see a connection between worship and service, a connection between what happens inside the cathedral’s walls (the worship of God) and what happens outside (the service of the poor).

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 % -- \$500,000 last year), and we enlist countless hours on the part of a large and incredibly diverse cadre of volunteers (700, currently), to respond to the human and social service needs of many needy people in the heart of our city. I think of our large and highly-respected English as a Second Language Program for immigrants and refugees; of our Catholic Worker Family Kitchen which for nearly thirty years has been serving dinner to a couple hundred people five days a week; of our overnight shelter for homeless men; of the Hunthausen Fund, an innovative grant and non-interest loan program for rent assistance which gets people out of shelters and into permanent housing; of the approximately \$125,000 (not part of the \$500,000 I mentioned a moment ago) 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, the Seattle Times, in a January 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 able to foot the bill for social

services got uncomfortable with the clientele 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 to receive important social services, but to provide them and to pay for them.

At the base of the domed 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 service we celebrate *inside* the cathedral with such solemnity gets its fullest meaning only when it continues *outside* the cathedral in all those messy places where people live their lives!

(4) The fourth and last 'land claim' I want to make for cathedrals has to do with their role 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 there 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 to St. James Cathedral by the thousands (the newspapers estimated 30,000) on the eve of the Gulf War in 1991 and they came in the wake of the terrible events of September 11, 2001, and on the anniversary one year later. They came when the city was devastated by the tragic deaths of four firefighters, killed one night in an arson-caused warehouse fire, they came when Yitzak Rabin was assassinated, and when the Oklahoma Federal Building was bombed, and when a devastating earthquake shook Japan, and when high school kids were mowed down at Columbine, and when Mother Teresa died. They came there 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 cathedrals try their best to give.

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 maybe ring our bells – and do everything we possibly can to get “the word to the press!”

