

Building a House for God

- 4th Sunday of Lent
- March 26, 2017
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Twenty years ago this week they celebrated the very first Mass in this brand-new Chapel of St. Ignatius. It happened to be Palm Sunday, so it was dramatized or highlighted by moving into this sacred space as they first gathered outside—as we still do on Palm Sunday—then processed into this chapel in its beauty, uniqueness, sculpted walls, curves, play of light and color. Fr. Sullivan, the president, presided and preached. The donors of the chapel brought up the gifts.

Thus began the 20-year history of this place of worship and the lives of all who worship here, are brought into the Christian community in Baptism and Confirmation, of so many who have celebrated here the Sacrament of Marriage, received forgiveness of sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, have sung and have been inspired by music and sacred concerts, gathered in moments of tragedy, honored the Martyrs of El Salvador each November 16th, celebrated the Red Mass of the legal community, the Law School baccalaureates, the alumni Advent Masses, and the funerals and memorials of students dying young, beloved professors and staff, and dearest friends. How many unknown, quiet visits have been made within these embracing and comforting walls by students praying for their families, or by relatives for their dear ones lying ill or dying in the surrounding hospitals, or just by all those drop-ins for a quick encounter with Christ in the tabernacle as part of a day's journey?

How clear it is that the widely acclaimed architectural triumph and beauty of this chapel is far surpassed by the beauty of the lives of those who have worshipped and prayed here. The chapel was consecrated on April 6th of that year by Archbishop Murphy, but more truly it has been consecrated, been made holy, a sacred place, by the grace of the lives of its people over those twenty years. I love the sculpted, trowelled, curved walls, but I imagine that the walls of this temple have been more truly sculpted, been given shape, by the texture of the lives of all who have sought and found God here. It has been consecrated less by the sacred oil that was splashed copiously on its walls at its dedication, and more by the oil of the lives of its communities of believers or of those seeking to believe. Above all, it has been made holy by the students of Seattle University in their searchings and findings, their puzzlings and prayers. It was always meant to be and has been the students' holy place, their temple, their chapel, the home base of their spiritual journeys. At one end of the campus we have the Student Center; at the other end the Student Chapel. It's nice of the students to let us use it!

On this Sunday twenty years later the word of God is serendipitously about anointing with oil—God's anointing and consecrating David through the prophet Samuel pouring oil over the head of the youngest son of Jesse, one the age of our students, choosing him and showing him special love as God chooses our students and loves them in a special way. The word of God is then about light, about being brought from darkness to live as children of the light, of proclaiming "Christ will give you light", the same light Christ offers our students. Finally, the word of God is about the man born blind, born in darkness, given first of all sight, light, by Jesus, and then even more wondrously being brought to faith as he exclaimed to Jesus himself, "I do believe,

Lord” and then worshipped him. This is a good image of the journey of our students toward faith.

If this chapel is anything it is the chapel of lights, the play of lights, light from above, light all around, light and tint, streak of sun and splash of color. Yes, it’s called the Chapel of St. Ignatius and was designed to reflect Ignatius’ illuminations from above, his mystical lights, in its famous seven bottles or scoops of light, but it could just as well be called “The Chapel of the Lights of Seattle U. Students” in whose honor and to whom it was more truly dedicated. On this Sunday in Lent, the season of the lengthening of light leading to the glory of Easter, we could have no better inspiration than the chapel itself on the 20th anniversary of its first Mass, which was another Mass in Lent.

What has this chapel meant for you more personally? How has it been a light, an illumination in your life? What have you found here? How has it shaped your life? How have you blessed and made it sacred with the oil of your life? How have you found God here and how has God found you? How does it reflect the shape of your faith and how have you given it shape by how you have made it sacred by the graces of your life? Is this also an anniversary for you?

When Fr. Sullivan preached at that first Mass of this just-build chapel, he spoke of an overwhelming insight and experience he had about building this chapel and building the house of God in our very selves. He starts his homily on that occasion in the following way:

“My heart and my spirit are filled with so many thoughts, so many images this morning that it is difficult to sort them out. But let me share with you the one thought, the one insight, that has dominated my experience of seeing this chapel built and now seeing it come to this day of inauguration.

“As we have built this House of God, I have become very conscious of how this task and its result expresses and symbolizes the fundamental task of our lives: the building of a house for God at the heart of our own lives. Human existence is, seen through the eyes of faith, the process of building a temple for the Holy Spirit, of making God present in his human creation, of transforming our years and our works into the dwelling place of God in our world... I have never experienced a more powerful metaphor of that truth than in the building of this chapel.”

Fr. Sullivan explained how the gift of the chapel by the donors was like the gift of God’s grace in the house of our lives, how the remarkably unique architectural shape of the chapel was a sign of the unique shape of every person, where she or he dwells with and welcomes God, and how the work of building the chapel would need to go on in adjustments, the appearance of cracks, the need for repairs as is needed in the ongoing work of building the temple of God which we are. This House of God... our personal house of God; this 20-year-old temple... our own mind, body, and soul as the temple the Spirit of God builds in us.

May this anniversary, this Chapel of St. Ignatius today be for each and all of us an illumination of our experience of God, our search for Him and He for us, our dwelling in Him and He in us,

and light for our journey this Lent toward the Holy Days of Christ's last supper, his passion and death, and his rising to be our radiant light and our everlasting home.