

The Face of Jesus Looking on Us from Our History

- *Grand Reunion Weekend*
- *May 7, 2017*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

We gather today in this Mass marking our grand reunion of alumni in this 125th year of Seattle University's history. We have gathered you from far away and near at hand, from far back and from more recent times. We gather in this architecturally-renowned, light-filled and light-reflecting Chapel of St. Ignatius. As a sacred place it represents the culmination of our history. What a glorious one! Twenty years ago at the Mass of the dedication, Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy, already terminally ill and only to live another three months, proclaimed in his homily:

“We celebrate today the creation of a sacred space here at Seattle University dedicated to St. Ignatius of Loyola. As a sacred space, it brings together the gifts of God's creation—stone, mortar, wood, and the gift of lights. We gather today to dedicate this sacred space as holy ground where God's light can shoot forth to every corner of this campus and share God's presence more fully with the Seattle University community—and it is good.”

It was a long journey of Seattle College and Seattle University to get to this chapel of lights, this holy ground. All of the journey was itself holy ground for Jesus Christ walked our history with our Jesuits and colleagues, our students and alumni, and will walk with us in our future. All along the holy ground of our history Jesus Christ was hiddenly there encouraging, gracing, accompanying, taking us by the hand, calling us forward. Rarely seen but always there, the reason and the true mission of our endeavor: Jesus.

One person I know very well and who has had a difficult life, mostly of darkness nevertheless writes: “One long look at my life, and there in its depth I see the face of Jesus gazing back at me.” So, too, we can say about our own history as a university, also often difficult and dark, that the face of Jesus gazes at us from its decades and depths. Jesus, always there, the very reason and the animator of our true story. Perhaps we can see the faces of Jesus in the chapels of our history.

First a makeshift chapel in a hall downtown, not a church at all, just a hall of a school building, but a sacred place to celebrate the first Mass of our history and to dedicate our university to the Immaculate Conception of Mary, to whom the United States of America had recently itself been dedicated. Then the face of Jesus was the face of the one who, almost unknown, called the first disciples: “Come and follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” A call and a promise of many to follow in a history started by him.

Then there was the ornate chapel of Garrand Hall, or Old Science Building, the original college building: white enamel, gold trim, candles, statues, communion rail, angels and saints abounding, a tabernacle covered by a veil, and a Jesuit priest raising the Host upward with the people behind him. That was the face of Jesus at night in prayer to the Father, a face of Jesus straining toward God, praying for the students and people of the college.

When the Liberal Arts Building was constructed in the 40s, now less felicitously called the Administration building, it faced toward Broadway as did Garrand, and right above the entrance was the chapel and the stained glass windows of the Immaculate Conception and the Sacred Heart. It is still there though we enter that building by what was then the back door. The face of Jesus gazing back at us from that chapel is the face of the Jesus of devotion, of feeling, of the heart, of tears, and joy, a very personal, intimate Jesus, a private Jesus more than a public one.

Along came the Second Vatican Council and the chapel for Masses was a wide open, carpeted room on the third floor of the Liberal Arts Building in the space of the recently relocated library. It was about as makeshift as the original chapel, a sort of set-up and take-down sacred space in an era of a set-up the new, try it out, take it down, try something else, and do it very publicly, informally, casually, relevantly. There the face of Jesus was Jesus in the milling crowds, or turning over the tables in the temple, a vigorous, with-it, even protesting Jesus, the friend of the students, a sort of Jamboree Jesus! Jesus was calling and accompanying and leading and promising. You can see a smile on the face of that Jesus and perhaps a song on his lips.

The next era of the chapels of Seattle University was a time of chapels tucked away in the residence halls, almost chapels in the closet. I remember celebrating Mass in the lobby of Xavier, pulling back a folding screen to reveal a closeted altar for Sunday use. So also tucked away in Bellarmine and Campion were chapels like bunkers. What a crazy time! A university nearly falling apart and then being rebuilt! The face of Jesus was the face of a Jesus biding his time, calling his disciples aside to tell them of what he must endure before he would be raised to life and would bring them to newness of life.

At last twenty years ago and today we have the Chapel of St. Ignatius, the Chapel of Lights, a chapel of the risen Christ and of the outpouring of the spirit, and as Archbishop Murphy remarked, shooting God's light to every corner of the campus. The face of Jesus here is almost seen, right behind these panels, casting his glance in yellow, green, blue, and red hues upon these sacred walls. How bare and simple this chapel is because it is all about the people inside and all about opening out to the people of the world, the face of Jesus looking in and the face of Jesus looking out. All the light here is indirect, on the slant. It's like a sacred space with Jesus saying, "Go and find me in the texture of your own life and above all in others."

At this very special Mass marking the 20th anniversary of the dedication of this culminating chapel and the grand gathering of our alumni from our 125-year history, we can truly say, "One long look at the life of our university and there in its depths we see the face of Jesus gazing back at us." May that be true of the personal life and story of each of us and of the history of the university we hold in common and we hold dear. May Jesus continue to call, walk with, and lead each of us and our university into our future, our university's future, and His future.