

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 11: MOTHER JOSEPH'S CHILD JESUS

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In 1894, Sister Claire of Jesus, a young Sister of Providence, lay sick in the convent infirmary in Vancouver. In a letter home, she described the little happenings around her—the comings and goings of the other Sisters, including Mother Joseph. “Our good Mother Joseph is making the most beautiful wax Infant Jesus,” she wrote to her father in 1894. “When she has them finished she brings them to my bed-side for me to see. They are really lovely. I wish the children could see them. And at her age, seventy four, she embroiders the little dresses for them, the finest kind of work. It is really wonderful.”

Sister Claire’s letter reflects the kindness of Mother Joseph, who visited the young nun faithfully (Sister Claire would die of tuberculosis the following year). It also reveals the indefatigable industry of the older nun, who, in addition to being a skilled architect and carpenter, was also an ingenious crafter of other articles: vestments, altar linens--and wax statues.

The Archives of the Sisters of Providence in West Seattle treasures many of these wax creations, as well as a handwritten page with the surprising heading *Recette pour faire les enfants Jésus* (“recipe for making infant Jesuses”). In her basement workshop at the House of Providence in Vancouver, Mother Joseph created dozens of waxworks, especially images of the child Jesus, which were sent all over the West to be used in manger scenes—and bring in a little income for the Sisters of Providence. The images are exquisitely detailed, with painted faces, carefully embroidered vestments, and beautiful curls. The story is told that one of the boys at the Sisters’ Vancouver orphanage, Johnnie Steffan by name, was the donor of the golden curls for many of these images. As his locks were cut off, Johnnie’s three sisters wept, but Mother Joseph unsentimentally remarked that Johnnie had been a girl long enough.

As she advanced in age, Mother Joseph’s eyesight weakened and she was no longer able to do the work which had been the driving force of her life. Bishop Paul Larroque of Canada, who had met Mother Joseph while visiting his own sister, also a Sister of Providence, wrote to reassure her that she was no less useful to the community now than in her busiest years: “It seems to me that you are consoled and strengthened, you who have so loved work, and are still at



An image of the Child Jesus created by Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart. Courtesy of the Providence Archives, Seattle.

work, since suffering is more efficient than ever for souls and for God's glory.... With this conviction and in spite of your body's decreasing strength, you are still useful to others and to yourself.”

Towards the end of 1901, it became clear that Mother Joseph was dying of cancer. She was soon confined to her bed. On January 1, 1902, she said, “My dear children, I see the first of the year, but I shall not see the last. I am in the arms of God.” A week later, Bishop O’Dea interrupted a pastoral visit to return to Vancouver to perform the last rites for Mother Joseph. On that occasion, she said to the community, gathered around her bed, “My sisters, I ask pardon for the grief I may have caused you. I forgive you also with all my heart for the sorrow you could have caused me involuntarily. I recommend myself to your prayers. I am happy to die in the bosom of the

Community. I love my Community and I have always loved it.” Then she added, “My Mothers and my Sisters, permit me to recommend to you the care of the poor both in our institutions and outside them; have no fear to assist the poor and to receive them--you will not have any regrets. Do not say: ah! this does not concern me, let others attend to them. My Sisters, whatever concerns the poor is always our affair.”

Mother Joseph lingered just a few more days. The Sisters’ *Chronicle* records that on January 16, 1902, the Sisters were gathered around the bed, singing favorite hymns. “During this tender scene... Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament brought the wax figure of the Infant Jesus into Mother Joseph's room. Mother took the Infant in her trembling hands, spoke silently to Him, embraced and kissed Him over and over, and then gave it back with a long look of farewell. While she held her dear Lord in her arms--this little Infant Jesus which she herself had made--we sang Bishop Bourget's favorite hymn, ‘How sweet, our Jesus, our most Tender Spouse.’”

Mother Joseph died peacefully on January 19, 1902. Mother Mary Antoinette described her as “the perfect model of a Sister of Charity, with her soul of flame, and her will of tempered steel.” In the words of Bishop Junger: “She has done more to advance Christianity on these Pacific shores than have many priests in the diocese.”

—Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy