

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 6: TABERNACLE MADE BY MOTHER JOSEPH

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When Bishop Blanchet, Father Rossi, and Mother Joseph and her companions disembarked at Vancouver on December 8, 1856, Father Brouillet was waiting on shore. Their reception, Mother Joseph wrote, was “as cordial as we could have hoped.” They had about a mile to walk to get to the Cathedral: “The road which led there wasn’t made to be walked on in dainty ankle boots,” wrote Father Rossi. “We sank in to the knees, and it wasn’t always easy to get out of those unexpected ruts. When we reached a little wooden ramshackle house, I asked Father Brouillet what that shanty was. ‘It’s the bishop’s palace,’ he replied. The bishop’s palace!!!”

Bishop Blanchet soon discovered that, in spite of his instructions, no accommodations had been prepared for the Sisters—at least, not in Vancouver. Father Brouillet felt that the Sisters should be in Olympia, which was more populous than Vancouver and growing every day, and he had counted on Bishop Blanchet seeing things his way. But Bishop Blanchet wanted the Sisters to be where he was. There was a somewhat

heated exchange between Blanchet and Brouillet before everyone trooped into the bishop’s house to make do with what they had. An unfinished attic, divided in two by a slight partition, became the temporary home for the five sisters and Father Rossi, who could only go to bed after the Sisters had retired and had to get up and get ready before they rose. There was no rest for the Sisters after their long journey: instead, they good-humoredly threw themselves into cleaning and rearranging their new quarters: it was “the first of many house-cleanings in Vancouver,” as Sister Mary McCrosson, SP wrote in *The Bell and the River* (1950), “not only the herald but the symbol of how the sisters would put their impress on the mission.”

At last, the entire party sat down for dinner. It being a special occasion, Father Brouillet slaughtered a pig which was served along with an abundance of other good things. Mother Joseph noticed, however, that, hungry as they were after their long voyage, the Sisters were tongue-tied and barely touched their food. Soon she realized that they were paralyzed with fright at sitting down to dine with two priests and a bishop, something they had never done in all their lives before! After that, arrangements were made for the Sisters to take their meals separately.

A few days after their arrival, Bishop Blanchet’s housekeeper, realizing her workload had doubled with the advent of the Sisters, handed in her notice. This proved a blessing. The Sisters



The tabernacle which Mother Joseph created out of a wooden candle box in 1857 is one of many treasures housed at Providence Archives in West Seattle. Courtesy of Providence Archives, Seattle.

moved from the attic into the housekeeper’s room. It was, Mother Joseph wrote, “a small chamber 16 feet by 10—I assure you that after placing five beds in it not much space remains for the table where we take our meals.” Nevertheless, she wrote, “I must tell you that for my part I encounter much less privation than I anticipated or desired.”

Mother Joseph’s skills in carpentry and design were soon put to use. Wooden boxes were turned into chairs for the Sisters, shelves for the prayer books, and a neat fold-down table for meals. Among the odds and ends stored in the Bishop’s attic, Mother Joseph found a beautiful embroidered image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus which became the centerpiece of a shrine on the wall of the Sisters’ room, a focal point for their devotion.

Meanwhile, Christmas was approaching, and Mother Joseph and Father Brouillet were determined to decorate the little tumbledown St. James Cathedral for Christmas. Father Brouillet collected evergreen branches from the forest and the Sisters filled the

little building with wreaths, festoons, and sprays, as well as making hand-dipped candles for the altar.

Construction on a separate building for the use of the Sisters had begun almost immediately, and by Ash Wednesday, the Sisters were able to move in. Bishop Blanchet dedicated a small chapel for them, and reserved the Blessed Sacrament there. The Sisters’ annals for 1857 report: “With a few boards, Sister Joseph built a suitable altar; from a candlebox she made a gem-like little tabernacle, painted and decorated with delicate gold ornament with the best material she could afford for a tabernacle veil.”

By June of 1857 – just six months after their arrival—the Sisters had opened a school with a dozen students, had taken in two orphans, and had nursed ten sick people in their homes and visited many more. “We are always busy, from morning to night, from night to morning, “ the little community wrote home to Montreal. “They fooled us well who told us that there was nothing to do here. If there were ten or twenty there would still be work for all.” And Mother Joseph wrote: “It seems to me that we will love to recall these small beginnings.”

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