

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 18: CHRISTMAS CARD FROM CAMP MINIDOKA

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The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 had a devastating impact on the Japanese community in the United States. Long-simmering prejudice erupted in acts of vandalism and violence. Fears of spies or agents for the Japanese government prompted the immediate freezing of the financial assets of all the Japanese in Seattle, throwing their lives into chaos.

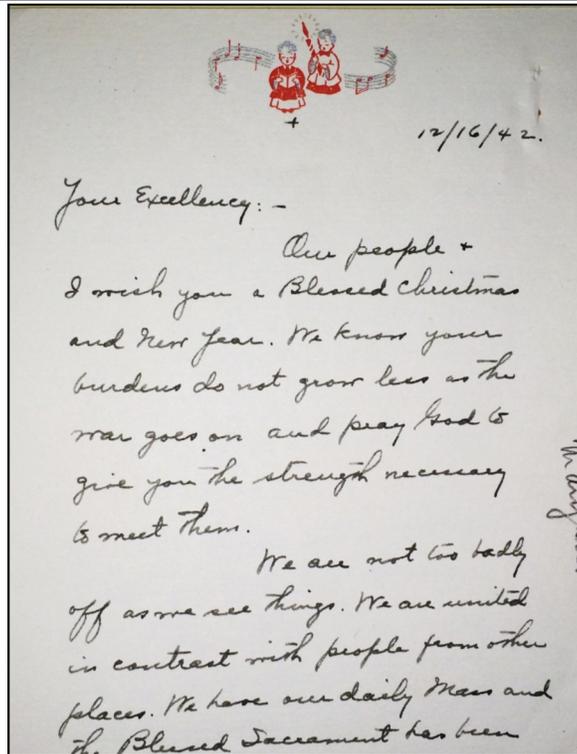
Seattle's Japanese community found a staunch supporter in Bishop Gerald Shaughnessy. In a pastoral letter read in every church in the diocese on December 14, 1941, the bishop called for a whole-hearted support of the war effort—and of people of Japanese descent: “Our Catholic heritage especially inculcates upon us in these momentous hours that we embrace our fellow American citizens of Japanese extraction in a special bond of charity.” His plea for tolerance earned him the epithet of “the goat-bearded bishop of Seattle” from *Time* magazine.

At Queen of Martyrs in Seattle, Japanese Catholic families found themselves unable to pay tuition or even buy groceries. Father Leo Tibesar, MM, their pastor, acted immediately. He suspended all tuition payments so that all the children could continue attending school. He also began collecting and distributing food to needy families.

As the threat of internment became a reality, Father Tibesar advocated for “his” families with many agencies, including the FBI, struggling to keep the parish community together, efforts which were largely successful. In May, 1942, he learned that several hundred parishioners would be temporarily interned at Camp Harmony in Puyallup. The thriving school was reduced to a handful of students. Father Tibesar made the decision to close the school, and go to the camp with his parishioners.

At Camp Harmony, Father Tibesar immediately re-established the rhythms of parish life, from daily Mass and weekly Benediction to meetings of sodalities. The entire community was deeply touched when Bishop Shaughnessy came to Camp Harmony to celebrate Confirmation.

Three months later, the people—with their priest—were moved to what was supposed to be a temporary relocation center in Idaho, but which ended up being their home for the next three years. On August 24, 1942, Father Tibesar sent Bishop Shaughnessy the first of many letters from Camp



A 1942 Christmas card sent to Bishop Gerald Shaughnessy by Father Leo Tibesar, MM from Camp Minidoka in Twin Falls, Idaho. Courtesy of the Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle.

Minidoka: “The location of the Camp is very good, land & water abundant & dust too. We’ll swallow a lot of the latter before this adventure is over.” Soon, the Legion of Mary and other parish groups were as active as ever—three choirs alternated in providing music for Sunday Masses! Father Tibesar worked hard to build a friendly relationship with the leadership of the Camp. “Officially I do not exist,” he wrote. “I am watching developments and exerting what pressure I can privately to obtain a modicum of that religious freedom we have in such quantities to export to all the nations of the earth.”

On December 2, he wrote: “Wish you could visit us sometime to get a picture of the place yourself. I’ve never been so completely lonely in my life. My room is just off the desert and the coyotes howl a good night just a stone’s throw from me. . . . Kindly keep me in prayer. I’d love to get away for a bit of rest—haven’t had a let-up since war broke

out.”

In spite of everything, the community kept the faith and stuck together. On December 16, 1942, they sent Bishop Shaughnessy a Christmas letter. “We are not too badly off as we see things. We are united in contrast with people from other places. We have our daily Mass and the Blessed Sacrament has been reserved here too since Dec. 8th. What we miss most is our school.”

Father Tibesar remained at Camp Harmony until the end of the war. But the community was changing. Nearly fifty of the young men of Queen of Martyrs joined the Army, and five of them were killed on the European front. Others were scattered to various parts of the country, wherever they could find work.

In 1944, Father Blanchard of St. Edward’s Seminary wrote to thank Father Tibesar for all he had done. Father Tibesar responded that what he had done should be considered “a matter of ordinary duty whose responsibility none of us may shirk,” adding, “our democracy must be universal or it becomes a sad mockery.”

—Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy

Want to know more? This and many other important moments in the history of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest come to life in *Journey of Faith*, the illustrated history of the Archdiocese of Seattle, available in the Cathedral Bookstore.