

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 23: MSGR. PREFONTAINE'S PECTORAL CROSS

3 MAY 2015

The Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle treasures a number of pectoral crosses belonging to the shepherds of the diocese, from Bishop Blanchet to Archbishop Hunthausen. The collection includes one cross which belonged not to a bishop, but to a priest: the pectoral cross presented to Father Francis X. Prefontaine at the time of his investiture as a Protonotary Apostolic (an especially high rank of Monsignor) in 1908.

Father Prefontaine arrived in Seattle in 1867, and built Seattle's first Catholic Church, Our Lady of Good Help, in 1869. He rubbed elbows with the Yeslers, Dennys, and many of the other early leaders who helped transform Seattle from a "lost cause" (Bishop Blanchet's words) to one of the fastest-growing cities on the west coast. Prefontaine was especially known as a promoter of education in Seattle: he served as an honorary board member for Seattle's first public library and was later instrumental in the building and growth of Holy Names Academy and Seattle University. Prefontaine was also an astute investor, particularly in real estate. When he died in 1909, he left a fortune of more than \$30,000, no mean sum at that time.

It was Father Prefontaine who first suggested to Bishop O'Dea that he move his seat from Vancouver to Seattle. Bishop O'Dea did, and for a short time, Our Lady of Good Help served as the pro-Cathedral. Prefontaine dreamed that a great cathedral would rise on the lot at Third and Washington which he had cleared with his own hands, and where he had labored for nearly forty years. But that was not to be. The land was sold to developers for a railroad tunnel (which ended up being built east of the site), and the pioneer church was rebuilt at Fifth and Jefferson.

Prefontaine was deeply disappointed. The removal of the church also meant the removal of his home since he had lived in the basement for more than twenty years. Prefontaine retired, moving to a new home on Capitol Hill where he served as chaplain to the Sisters of the Holy Names, spending the balance of his time either in his extensive library or entertaining his many friends. "I have led a strenuous life," he told a reporter for the *Seattle Daily Times*, "and I feel as though I need a rest."

But Bishop O'Dea ensured that Prefontaine's career did not end in disappointment. Through his recommendation, Pope Pius X named Prefontaine a Protonotary Apostolic, the first in



Prefontaine's pectoral cross with its red silk cord is still treasured in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle. After his death, it was presented to Msgr. Daniel Hanly, the Cathedral's first pastor, upon his own elevation to the rank of Protonotary Apostolic.

the Northwest. The new rank brought new dignity in dress—robes of purple silk, and gloves, ring, and pectoral cross not unlike those worn by a bishop. More importantly, it was a great honor bestowed at the end of Prefontaine's distinguished career, as a sign of the Church's gratitude to a priest who had been instrumental in the building up of the faith in the Pacific Northwest.

Prefontaine's elevation was marked with due solemnity on September 24, 1908, just a few days after his seventieth birthday. St. James Cathedral was filled with his friends and fans, as well as representatives from every parish in Seattle. Forty priests crowded the sanctuary to honor their friend. After the reading of the decree from Pope Pius X, Bishop O'Dea invested Prefontaine with the signs of his new dignity, including the pectoral cross. "His life has been an open book," said Bishop O'Dea, "to be published at large throughout the state. He has seen your children grow to manhood and womanhood and no one can say that he has been aught but a faithful servant." After his investiture, Msgr.

Prefontaine celebrated Pontifical Mass in the Cathedral—another special privilege attached to his new rank. The *P-I* reported: "His kindly face wreathed in smiles, Msgr. Prefontaine expressed his gratitude that the ceremony passed off so happily."

Perhaps even more delightful was the banquet which followed at the Savoy Hotel, located in a brand-new high rise on Second Avenue (since demolished). The menu for the occasion survives in the Archives. It is headed by a passage from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "This day I hold an old accustom'd feast; / Whereto I have invited many a guest." The menu details an extraordinary 12-course feast ranging from caviar canapés to turtle soup to potatoes dauphine to braised squab chicken à la Henry to nesselrode pudding, Roquefort cheese, and demi tasses. During the banquet, the hotel orchestra, according to all reports, outdid themselves with the music, and Bishop O'Dea again paid tribute to the new Monsignor, expressing the hope that Father Prefontaine might "live many years to enjoy the honor" he had received.

That was not to be. Just six months later, on March 4, 1909, Prefontaine died after a brief illness. His bishop and his beloved Sisters of the Holy Names and Sisters of Providence were at his side.

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