

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 29: BLUEPRINT FOR THE CATHEDRAL'S MOTHER CABRINI

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In 1950, when Bishop Connolly set about modernizing the Cathedral, he knew he wanted to fill the three niches on the front of the Cathedral with images of saints. He chose St. James, of course, St. John Vianney, and St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, Seattle's own saint, who had been canonized just four years earlier.

Mother Francesca Saviero Cabrini, the redoubtable founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, was born in Lombardy in 1850, but she spent her life all over the world: Rome, New York, Nicaragua, Buenos Aires, Panama, Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, Seattle. Mother Cabrini's motto was "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13) and she lived by that creed. "Let us work for God, let us tire and sacrifice ourselves for His love," she wrote to one of her communities, "and when we feel we can do no more, let us say: My Jesus, all for Thee, and let us continue to work and tire ourselves. We shall have Eternity during which to rest."

Mother Cabrini first arrived in Seattle in 1903. "Here we are not far from the North Pole," she wrote in a letter home. She loved the young city: "The city is charmingly situated, and is growing so rapidly that it will become another New York; its port is open to the steamers that sail to and from Alaska. The town of Seattle spreads over twenty hills; and though it is fifty degrees north latitude, it enjoys an interminable spring because of the current that comes from Japan."

Mother Cabrini found a rich field for her mission work in Seattle, where thousands of Italians had settled in the Rainier Valley. "In the valleys surrounding the hills where we are, there are about 5,000 Italians, who follow us like baby chicks with a brooding hen. We hope we shall be able to do them some good. Although they have been neglected, they have not lost their traditional faith. They love the Madonna." She established a firm friendship with Bishop O'Dea: "The bishop is very good. His name is O'Dea and he is happy to have us in his diocese because we bear the name of the Sacred Heart of Jesus."

With Bishop O'Dea's strong support, Mother Cabrini established Sacred Heart Orphanage on Beacon Hill, which soon grew into Mount Carmel Mission, a center for ministry to Italians, with regular Masses and confessions, a workshop, and a school.



Above: Blueprint for the statue of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini on the west façade of St. James Cathedral. *Archives of St. James Cathedral.* **Below:** Mother Cabrini's first Seattle mission on Beacon Hill. *Courtesy of Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle.*

After a few months, Mother Cabrini entrusted the new foundation to her Sisters and continued on to her next challenge. At one point the overburdened Sister in charge of the Seattle mission made the mistake of complaining to Mother Cabrini, who sent back this advice: "In the morning, rise at five o'clock sharp... work like a young sister... do not complain that it is too much or you will never be blessed by the Holy Spirit."

Mount Carmel Mission on Beacon Hill did not last long. By 1910, plans for the regrade of 12th Avenue meant the site of the orphanage would be sluiced away, and the Sisters asked Mother Cabrini to come back and help them find a new property.

The Seattle community could have found a new site themselves, of course. But they knew Mother Cabrini had a positive genius for acquiring property. She combined boundless faith and simple piety with shrewd business acumen. Upon her return to Seattle, she looked at a map of the city and sent two of the Sisters to look in the Laurelhurst neighborhood. Though the Sisters were doubtful about finding anything in that part of town, they did Mother's bidding and returned full of enthusiasm: "We have seen heaven on earth!" Only then did Mother Cabrini tell them she had

seen the site in a dream. Soon a brand-new school, Sacred Heart Villa, rose on the site (it is now known as Villa Academy).

It was at this "heaven on earth" that one of the miracles for Mother Cabrini's canonization took place, just over a decade later. In 1925, a 34-year old sister named Delfina Grazioli became seriously ill. She was unable to eat, barely able to move. As she later wrote: "Finally one night, I couldn't sleep and I looked up and Mother was standing there. She shook her finger at me, just like she always did, and said: 'I'm going to send you to work.' Then she smiled and disappeared." Sister Delfina was cured. She did go back to work—for another forty years!

Not all of Mother Cabrini's property negotiations went as smoothly as the purchase of the site for Sacred Heart Villa. Her biggest Seattle project—Columbus Hospital—would strain her friendly relationship with Bishop O'Dea, as we will see in our next issue.

—Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy