

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 39: 15TH STATION BY GABRIEL LOIRE FOR THE SISTERS OF PROVIDENCE

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In the 1930s, the Sister Formation movement began to gather momentum among American women religious. Catholic sisters had been pioneers in education in the United States. They ran thousands of elementary and high schools, and not a few colleges as well. However, the intellectual preparation of the Sisters was inconsistent at best. Many religious communities were unable to provide adequate training for young novices, who often entered the classroom not much older than the children they were teaching, and with little background in the subjects they were to teach or in the art of teaching itself. It was a recipe for frustration for teachers and students alike. On the rare occasions when Sisters were allowed to go on to further education, they usually had to do so through intensive summer courses, because their presence was required in the classroom throughout the school year. It could take them ten or even twenty years to complete a degree program.

That began to change in the 1940s and 1950s. In the summer of 1956, a group of leaders in the Sister Formation movement gathered in Everett, where they developed a model for the preparation of Sisters for teaching and other ministries. The “Everett Curriculum,” as it came to be called, was promptly put in place in a new program—the Providence Sisters’ Institutional Branch at Seattle University.

The program was a striking success, so much so that the Providence Sisters decided to build a brand-new dedicated campus which would provide training for Sisters of Providence and other congregations of women religious as well. The complex of buildings cost 4 million dollars, and included classrooms, living quarters, and a large chapel.

Providence Heights College of Sister Formation was blessed on July 21, 1961. It was a major event for the Church in the Pacific Northwest: Archbishop Vagnozzi, the Apostolic Delegate, presided, while Archbishop Connolly preached. “This is an historic and auspicious occasion,” Connolly began, “a far cry from the year 1857 when five Sisters of Charity of Providence founded the first permanent school in the northwest in a rude wilderness outpost on the Columbia River.” Echoing the words of the pioneers of the Sister Formation movement, he said: “there is no justice in taking a young woman who has left the world to dedicate her life to the service of God and the Church and in hustling her ill-equipped, intellectually and spiritually, into her teaching assignment. The sisters have taken the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience... but they have not taken a vow of intellectual incompetence or professional incapacity.”

The Providence Heights campus reflected the Sisters’ search



Above: The Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows at Providence Heights Sisters College in Issaquah featured monumental stained glass by renowned artist Gabriel Loire of Chartres, France, commissioned by the Sisters of Providence. Loire also created the Stations of the Cross. **Below:** Loire designed a 15th Station of the Resurrection which was not installed. He gifted his study drawing to the Sisters of Providence. *Courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of Providence, Seattle.*

for the best in contemporary architecture and art. The Sisters chose local artists for the altar, pews, and tabernacle, but for the windows and the Stations of the Cross they went all the way to Chartres, France and to Gabriel Loire. Loire, one of the most prominent stained glass artists of the time, created fourteen massive triangular windows representing favorite themes of the Sisters of Providence: the seven works of mercy and the seven sorrows of Mary. Loire used a technique called *dalle de verre* (literally, “glass slabs”), setting one-inch thick pieces of glass into concrete. The strength of the concrete allowed him to create enormous stretches of stained glass—the windows at Providence Heights are thirty feet high—and the thickness of the glass made for an extraordinary richness of color.

In addition to the windows, Loire created a remarkable set of mosaic Stations of the Cross for the Sisters. He proposed a fifteenth

station of the Resurrection, but this was quite a modern idea in 1961, and this last station was never actually made. Loire eventually gifted his original drawing for the fifteen station to the Sisters of Providence.

Art was given high priority at Providence Heights. In addition to the wonderful Chapel appointments, the new campus housed a truly remarkable collection of art gifted to the Sisters over the years: works by Bronzino, Sir Thomas Lawrence, Angelica Kauffman, among others. The collection—which was made accessible to the general public—was the clearest possible expression of the Sisters’ belief in the importance of the arts in the spiritual and intellectual formation of the human person.

The glory of Providence Heights was short-lived. The upheaval of the 1970s saw a total transformation of religious life: the number of vocations dropped and those who entered were often older than they had been in the past; most had already completed their undergraduate education. The Sister Formation movement lost its urgency. Just ten years after its dedication, Providence Heights was sold. It housed the Lutheran Bible Institute before ownership transferred to City Church. Now, the 1961 campus has been sold again, and will soon be razed to make way for a new housing development. Plans are underway, however, to preserve the Loire windows and stations—a reminder of a short-lived but important endeavor in the history of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*

You can view a video tour of Providence Heights in its heyday at the YouTube channel of the Providence Archives. Link at the Cathedral website!