(Re)Dedication marks renewal of historic Vancouver parish

Former cathedral church gets makeover and restores its traditional beauty after more than a century of use

VANCOUVER BY REG MAGNOI

The history of St. James Parish in Vancouver dates back to the 19th-century settlements of French-Canadian Catholics in the Northwest. As the first cathedral of the Diocese of Bellingham-Nootka, St. James is listed on the National Historical Registry, and it played a central role in the earliest days of what would become the Archdiocese of Seattle.

But as the St. James Parish community prepares for the dedication of its new altar and blessing of its remodeled church, the venerable old building is not merely a reminder of its former prominence. The remodeled structure chronicles an urban faith community’s cyclical decline and dramatic renewal.

As residential downtown Vancouver gave way to urbanization, more and more of the region’s rapidly growing population migrated to the suburbs, leaving fewer and fewer residents within its tiny urban boundaries. Current Pastor Father Dominic Hahn said the Gothic-style church, once Vancouver’s main parish with six missions dating back to 1867, was in danger of becoming a mere footnote in local church history.

“When the church was falling apart, the roof was leaking very badly, we had buckets all over the floor catching water,” Father Hahn said. “The building had to be restored completely to save it. It was in shambles. The rectory was in shambles.”

In addition, registered households dropped from more than 900 in the 1990s to fewer than 600 prior to the start of the restoration project.

Today, the former cathedral church is a destination parish serving nearly 800 families with most of its members drawn from outlying areas by its traditional beauty. The transformation of the church and rebirth of the parish community began in 1999 and today it boasts a sparkling “new” church that highlights the original architecture.

On Nov. 9, Archbishop Alex J. Brunett will celebrate a Mass of dedication to bless the church's new altar and interior, followed by a luncheon celebration for those who participated in the church’s renovation over the past 10 years. The liturgy and gathering will give the parish an opportunity to look back on its remarkable revitalization and to look forward to its future as a vital part of the southwest Washington faith community.

$1-million renovation

The renovation project began with repairs to exterior brickwork and roofs, and included repair and replacement of aging heating and cooling systems. The grounds were landscaped with a fountain and statue of Our Lady of Vancouver. Fencing was installed to protect the refurbished exterior space from vandalism.

The rectory and parish hall were updated and improved to update living space for the pastor, office space for the staff and meeting areas for religious education classes and social activities.

In March of 2008, Mass was moved to the parish hall so a major renovation of the church interior could begin. The restoration project included removal and repair of 14 stained glass windows, which were reinstalled with protective storm windows. Stations of the Cross were restored and church statues were cleaned and repaired.

Pews were taken out and refurbished. An asbestos abatement team removed old tile, and worn and peeling lathe-and-plaster walls were repaired and treated with fiberglass. The $1-million makeover was completed when a team of artists painted the walls and ceiling. The natural stone was laid in the floor.

““It’s always been just a beautiful church,” said Bob Kunselman, a retiree who has volunteered as a parish archivist and assisted with coordination during the remodel, describes the parish as “close-knit” and “family-oriented.”

“It’s just very friendly,” he said. Anne Eyford, who joined the church with her husband, Cornell, in 1993, agreed, and added that the old church holds a strong appeal for many who attended Mass there.

“It’s a very friendly place. People come here because they want to come here,” said Eyford, who has served as the parish secretary since 1996. She added that part of the church’s appeal is its traditional, cruciform dimensions. When you go in “you feel like you’re in a European church,” she said. “People feel very at home there.”

Although most of the young families in the greater Vancouver area belong to parishes that were once missions of St. James, Eyford said members of the parish remain active with a men’s group and altar society that maintain the worship space and plan social functions. Parish members actively support Winter Hospitality Overflow, a citywide temporary housing program, as well as St. Vincent de Paul’s city chapter and the local chapter of Birthright, an international crisis pregnancy service.

As the first parish in Vancouver, St. James also administers Mother Joseph Cemetery, which serves the needs of Catholic families throughout the area.

Church History

St. James became a cathedral more than 150 years ago when the Most Rev. Augustine Blanchet was named Bishop of Nesqually with residence in Vancouver, Washington Territory. The first church constructed outside of Fort Vancouver was a small wood-frame building constructed in 1846 at the direction of the frugal Blanchet.

Mother Joseph, the pioneering Sister of Providence who arrived in 1856 with four other nuns, is credited with supervising construction of the second St. James Cathedral when it was erected in 1885. Built by Bishop Aegidius Jungcr, who succeeded the retired Bishop Blanchet in 1879, the brick-and-stone, Gothic-towered landmark measures 145 feet long and 60 feet wide and accommodates approximately 800 people.

The original cathedral was later destroyed by fire in 1889. In September 1907, the territorial see was officially transferred to Seattle. The title of St. James Cathedral was transferred to Seattle with the bishop, and Vancouver’s St. James became a parish church.

Referred to as Our Lady of Vancouver, the sculpture in St. James newly remodeled plaza includes a backdrop of the Cascade Mountains and Mary holding a model of the church with details of Fort Vancouver, evergreen trees, Native Americans and the Hudson Bay Company depicted at her feet. The bronze statue was cast in Canada.

Address: 218 W. 12th St., Vancouver, WA 98660 Phone: 360-693-3052 Web site: www.saintjames-parish.com

Founded: 1838
Registered households: 793
Pastor: Father Dominic Hahn

Pastors:
Father Francis Norbert Blanchet, 1838
Father Modest Demers, 1844
Father V.E. Deleneau, 1847
Father Jean Baptiste Brouillet, 1847
Father Louis G. de Schram, 1881
Father Felix Verwvighen, 1893
Msgr. John Sweens, 1915
Father John Egan, 1925
Father Robert Dillon, 1952

Photographs courtesy of St. James

St. James is listed on the National Historical Registry.