

Centennial and Sesquicentennial Remembrances

James J. Norris & Bishop Thomas J. Shahan

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Centennial of the Birth of James J. Norris

In the area known as the Hall of American Saints on the Crypt Level of the National Shrine, there is a bronze bust, which visitors often mistake for John F. Kennedy. True, the sculptor of this bronze work, Miss Jimilu Mason of Virginia, also sculpted the JFK

head displayed in the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the quote incised on the pedestal is similar in fervor—including the “torch” metaphor—to that of JFK. The bust, however, is that of James J. Norris (1907-1976) who was a member of the National Shrine’s Board of Trustees (1968-1976). The quote is from Norris’s acceptance speech for the prestigious Nansen Medal (1975) awarded by the U.N. in recognition of “outstanding services rendered to the cause of refugees and displaced persons.”

The life of James J. Norris was not one of coincidences, but of one who followed the “sweet impulses” of a divine rhythm. How else can one account for the many lives that he touched: Fr. Thomas A. Judge, Dorothy Day, Patrick Cardinal O’Boyle, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pius XII, and Monsignor Montini/ Paul VI.

The efforts of Mr. Norris on behalf of the poor and dispossessed of the world are many. He is most remembered as the first member of the laity in the history of the Church to address the Council fathers at Vatican II on poverty and the Christian conscience (November 5, 1965), proposing a papal commission on social justice and peace (*Justitia et Pax* and *Cor Unum*). Mr. Norris also administered a program of relief, welfare and rehabilitation among the displaced persons of seventy-four countries of Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America and organized programs for the resettlement of 300,000 refugees.

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James J. Norris is greeted by Pope Paul VI at the Vatican in 1975.

August 10, 2007 marked the centennial of the birth of Jim Norris, whose vision was responsible in part for the Bishops’ Pastoral: Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith, which resulted in the Marian catechesis program.

Upon his death, Mr. Norris’s body was brought to the National Shrine’s Immaculate Heart of Mary Chapel for a prayer service. At his behest, he was then buried within view of the National Shrine at St. Mary’s Cemetery, located at 2121 Lincoln Road, NE, Washington, D.C.

Sesquicentennial of the Birth of Bishop Thomas J. Shahan

September 11, 2007 is the 150th anniversary of the birth of the National Shrine’s founder, Bishop Thomas J. Shahan, the fourth rector of The Catholic University of America (1909–1928). The visionary and promoter of the National Shrine in its early stages, it was Bishop Shahan who suggested building a national shrine to honor Mary, comparable to the great sanctuaries of Europe. In 1913, he presented his plan to Pope Pius X (1903–1914) and received not only the enthusiastic support of the Pontiff, but also a personal contribution.

Bishop Shahan remained actively involved in the construction of the Shrine until his death on March 9, 1932. The only person buried in the Shrine, the body of Bishop Shahan rests in what is known as the Founder’s Chapel.

Note: In honor of these two men, artifacts and memorabilia will be displayed in the National Shrine’s Memorial Hall through December 2007. ❧



Shrine Founder, Bishop Thomas J. Shahan, with Monsignor Bernard A. McKenna, First Shrine Director, at the blessing of the site of the National Shrine in 1928.

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