

At that First Eucharist: Easter Sunday 1924

BY DR. GERALDINE M. ROHLING

This Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014, the National Shrine will mark the 90th anniversary, to the liturgical day, of the first Mass celebrated in this church.

On Easter Sunday, April 20, 1924, in the Crypt Church at 9 o'clock in the morning, Reverend Doctor Bernard A. McKenna, personal secretary to Bishop Shahan and the first director of the National Shrine offered the first Mass. Bishop Shahan preached. Father McKenna, wearing the alb he wore at his first Mass, chanted the solemn Gregorian Mass for Easter Sunday morning using the *Missale Romanum* that had belonged to the late Archbishop Michael A. Corrigan of New York (1885-1902). The chalice used on this day was the first vessel made specifically for the National Shrine. Among the donated gems and jewelry used in this chalice are the chains and pectoral crosses of two bishops.

In spite of the weather—it was rainy and cold—the Crypt Church was filled to capacity (900 people). One of the more distinguished diplomats to attend was Sir Esme W. Howard, British Ambassador to the United States (1924-1930), a good friend and benefactor of the National Shrine (Memorial Hall tablet, 11W). Also among the notables were Don Juan Riaño y Gayangos, Spanish Ambassador (1914-1926), Dean of the Diplomatic Corps in the United States, Admiral William S. Benson, USN (Memorial Hall tablet, 30W), and General Tasker H. Bliss, USA, governor of the Soldiers' Home (1920-1927). All three of these men were present at the laying of the Foundation Stone.

Amid all the pomp and grandeur that a construction site could muster, the congregation sat on folding chairs situated between support beams and joists and knelt upon the rough, unfinished concrete floor. The altar rail was formed by benches placed together and draped with white clothes. The wood altar was that of Archbishop John Carroll. Made in 1774, this altar was used by the first bishop of the

United States in the home of his mother near Rock Creek, Maryland. This altar—the oldest in this area—was used by Father Carroll until his elevation to the See of Baltimore in 1789. The Carroll altar was the main altar in the Crypt Church until 1927.



The crucifix dominating the nave was sculpted in bronze and wood by the winner of the *Prix de Rome*. Current research has yet to reveal the name of the artist. At the beginning of each day, the construction workers gathered around this crucifix and asked for a blessing that they might be protected physically and spiritually. As construction on the Shrine advanced, this crucifix, first placed in the north apse, always went before, leading the way.

In the course of the next five years, the National Shrine will observe many landmark events and centenaries, climaxing in a year-long celebration of the 100th anniversary of the laying of the Foundation Stone (September 23, 2019-2020). This pilgrimage of historical events began on August 15, 2013, when the National Shrine solemnly observed the centenary of the meeting between Pope (Saint) Pius X and Bishop Shahan, founder of the National Shrine. During this private audience, the Holy Father gave his blessing to begin raising the funds for the building of this great and noble votive church. A record of this event was reported on the title page of the inaugural publication of *Salve Regina* 1914. (For further reading, see “Celebrating a Century of *Salve Regina* and *Mary’s Shrine*” in the 2013 Spring/Summer edition of *Mary’s Shrine*.)

Join the family of the National Shrine this Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014 as we celebrate this once-in-a-lifetime moment in Shrine history. Visit the National Shrine website www.nationalshrine.com, Facebook, or Twitter, for information and updates. ☕

