

# The First Jewel of the National Shrine

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In the film classic, *Lilies of the Field* (1963), the story is told of the building of a chapel in a parched, unforgiving desert. With little more than faith and a prayer, a group of religious sisters—led by Mother Maria—come “over the wall” from East Berlin in East Germany to make a new life on an inherited piece of land in the American Southwest. Convinced of the need for a chapel for the local community, the sisters, devoid of any financial wherewithal, did what they did best: they prayed—and prayed, and prayed.

Enter Homer Smith (a.k.a. “Schmidt”), the ex-G.I. and itinerant handyman who Mother Maria believes was sent by God to help her build the chapel. The match, although made in heaven, is not without its difficulties. At one moment of crisis, Schmidt and Mother Maria engage in a Scriptural joust; Mother Maria wins (see Matthew 6: 28-30). With the help of the local community, the “handmade” adobe chapel nears its completion. As the adornments are added, a couple brings a large candle chandelier, the one item of beauty and worth from their home, and donates it to the chapel. “Schmidt,” clearly struck by the generosity, says: “Oh! Well, we’re gonna have to find a very special place to put that! Thank you. Thank you.” (It becomes the main lighting fixture in the church.) He then turns to the local contractor, who had been less than forthcoming with the donation of building materials, and says, “Everybody wants to give.”

## Everybody Wanted to Give

In 1915, Reverend Bernard A. McKenna of Philadelphia took over his responsibilities as “Secretary to Bishop Shahan with especial charge of the work of the National Shrine.” In addition to the actual church structure, many vestments, chalices, ciboria, and altar-plate were essential for the liturgical services that would be celebrated daily. McKenna began his appeal for “used ornaments, old gold and silver, precious stones and personal decorations no longer worn, but kept as heirlooms or mementos of those who have gone before.” McKenna noted, “What holier or more pleasing use” could be made of these treasures than to have them reworked into the altar vessels for the National Shrine?

Precious gems, jewelry, watches and watch chains, and rings began arriving at the National Shrine. Most of these gifts were from the United States but there were others from Europe and South America. Among these treasures were two episcopal pectoral crosses and chains; the gold-rims of an elderly gentleman’s spectacles, a medal from a child, silver spoons, silver trays and cups. Of particular interest was the offering of a miner from Bonner, Montana, who sent a gold ring set with a sapphire. In addition, the miner donated fifty-one rough uncut stones, sapphires, and topazes that he believed Divine Guidance helped him to find. Another miner from Colorado sent a gold nugget. There was also a gold ring from Brother Joseph Dutton, a Civil War veteran and the faithful assistant of Father (Saint) Damien on Molokai.

Everybody wanted to give. Most of the jewelry was from living persons but there were also bequests. Many donated the wedding rings worn by their mothers, which usually included a letter requesting that the ring be used in a “holy vessel”. The donated gold, jewelry, and gems were sent to Jenkins & Jenkins of Baltimore, one of the finest silversmiths in the area, to be fashioned into a chalice for the National Shrine.

The Jenkins brothers belonged to one of the distinguished founding families of Maryland who emigrated from Wales in the mid-17th century and settled in Charles County under the patronage of Charles Calvert. They were a clan of very successful Catholic businessmen, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists. In addition to the chalice, Jenkins & Jenkins also crafted the silver trowel, also made from donated jewelry, which James Cardinal Gibbons used at the laying of the Foundation Stone of the National Shrine (23 September 1920).

Everybody wanted to give. Bishop Shahan realized that his dream was still somewhat in the distance. He thought it better to focus on the smaller, immediate goals. In 1917, in anticipation of the great national church, a special chapel in honor of Mary Immaculate was proposed. A small but “richly finished room” on the left of the main corridor of Caldwell

Hall was chosen. Today it is the administrative offices for the Dean of the School of Theology. A painting of the *Immaculate Conception* by Murillo, corresponding in size to the Madrid original, hung over the altar. Above the entrance was the inscription “Salve Regina Chapel of the Shrine of Mary Immaculate.”

In the absence of Bishop Shahan, Father McKenna celebrated “the first Mass publicly said in honor of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception” in the parlor chapel on December 8, 1917. The altar was that used by Archbishop John Carroll when he celebrated his first Mass at the home of his mother in Rock Creek, Maryland. Carroll used this altar until his elevation to the See of Baltimore. It is the oldest known artifact of its kind in this area. The Missal was that of the late Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York. The vestments were the gift of Bishop Shahan, given to him on the occasion of his episcopal consecration. Of all the gifts however, none was more precious than that of the *First Chalice of the National Shrine*.

The chalice, shown in the photo, is 14K gold and stands 10 inches tall. The base of the chalice carries the inscription: *National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception / Catholic University / Washington, D.C. / Its First Chalice Dec. 8th 1917/ Bishop Shahan/ Laus Deo et Maria [Praise to God and Mary]*.

Everybody wanted to give. The following year (1918), the Salve Regina Chapel, constructed behind Caldwell Hall, replaced the “parlor chapel.” This structure was of corrugated iron purchased from Sears-Roebuck for \$125. (Today, a little more than \$2,000.) The Sisters of St. Joseph in Concordia, Kansas, led by Mother Antoinette Cuff, decided to help their dear friend Bishop Shahan and contributed from their start-up money for Marymount College. This was an offering-petition for the blessing of God on their work. The following year, the cornerstone for Marymount College was set and the college opened in 1922.

The First Chalice is a treasure, a “first jewel.” It is a “cup of blessing” for the National Shrine and the generations yet to come. Each time the chalice is used, the names of the donors sealed within the stem and all benefactors of the National Shrine, both old and new, are remembered at that Mass.



Trowel



First Chalice

On 8 December 2017, one hundred years since that first Mass in the “parlor chapel,” this chalice, the “first jewel” of the National Shrine, will be used at the Mass for the dedication of the Trinity Dome Mosaic, the “crowning jewel” of this national church dedicated to Mary.

Sometimes, simply giving what one has to give makes all the difference.

Consider the lilies of the field. ☘