

THE BLESSING OF THE LAND

Geraldine M. Rohling, Ph.D., M.A.Ed.
Archivist-Curator

The custom of blessing is as old as creation itself. In the book of Genesis, we read that at the end of each “day,” God blessed the work. Thus, on the third day, God created “the dry land, ‘Earth,’ ... [and] God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:10-12). All was made holy.

There are many types of blessings; among them, blessings for churches and the land upon which they stand. This blessing designates the structure and the acreage for divine service and creates a distinct spiritual relationship; an abiding quality of sacredness. The church and the land are made inviolably sacred.

A Question of Location

In 1885, Walter S. Perry (trustee for the Middletons) and Mary V. Middleton recorded a deed of sale to James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore, for a 62-acre tract of land known as “Turkey Thicket.” This purchase was part of the effort of the American bishops of the Roman Catholic Church to establish a graduate school for the “sacred sciences” in Washington, D.C. that would rival similar institutions of Europe.

The wisdom of this purchase—not the land but its location—came into question two years later. Situated three or four miles from the “heart of the city,” it was considered “inconvenient” and too far outside of the city of Washington, D.C. Earlier maps and publications occasionally referred to this part of the District as “the northeast frontier,” with Boundary Road (Florida Avenue, NE), marking the limits of the city. Further objections were raised because of the proximity of the acreage to the cattle yards of the B & O Railroad that formed its eastern boundary (now the Metro line). Consequently, there was talk of selling the estate and purchasing a tract of land closer to downtown. Consideration was also given to property just east of Howard

University but its proximity to Glenwood Cemetery and other burial grounds made it similarly unpleasant. The location question was thoroughly discussed both privately and, with the help of the press, publicly. During their fall meeting of 1887, the bishop trustees agreed

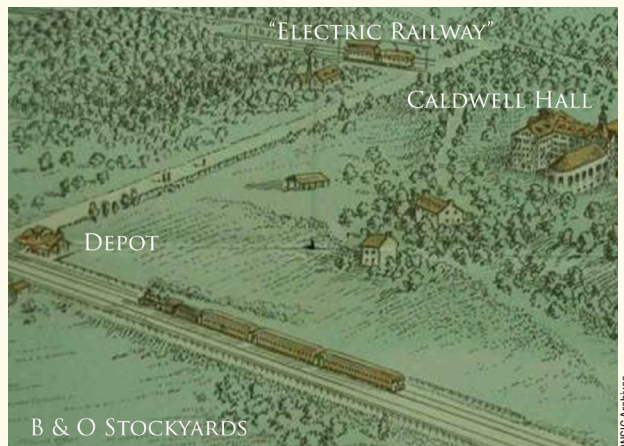
to retain the Middleton estate in northeast D.C. and proceed with the original plan.

The city was growing and within two years, the extension of the “Eckington electric railway” (streetcar) up Fourth Street to Michigan Avenue, would open up the area previously tagged as “unavailable property.” With the extension of the streetcar line came the addition of streetlights, another sign of urbanization. To enable further access, the bishops planned to give the B&O Railroad “sufficient ground” for the construction of “a handsome depot,” Cardinal Station, which, in February of 1978, would become the Brookland/CUA station on the Metro Red Line. Such improvements aided in the development of the surrounding community of “Brookland.” Whether by chance or just shrewd business, the 1887 development of the adjacent 134 acres of the estate of Colonel Jehiel Brooks, in tandem with the rise of “little Rome,” was a venture that would and did pay well. During the commencement exercises of June 1909,



Creation, Mary Reardon (1973)

Geraldine M. Rohling



1890 Map

BNHC Archives

Rector Thomas J. Shahan noted, “the university found Northeast Washington an undeveloped section of the city. Gradually this section has developed [in tandem with the university] ... until Brookland ... was rightly accounted among the most desirable parts of our beautiful city.”

The Gaffe of the Secretary

In 1910, Rev. Patrick J. Waters of Boston, a Ph.D. candidate appointed to the Anna Hope Hudson Fellowship in Philosophy, became the private secretary to Rector Shahan. One day in the spring of 1911, Shahan invited Waters to go for a walk. As they wandered about the grounds admiring the beauty, Shahan told Waters of his plan to “erect a beautiful national shrine.”

In a letter written some fifty years later, Rt. Rev. Msgr. Waters sheepishly admitted that he “tried to discourage” Shahan by saying “there were already beautiful churches in Baltimore and Washington,” and suggested a smaller project, “a church for students.” Shahan, ever the visionary, had his mind set on a magnificent shrine modeled after similar churches in Europe.

In this same letter, Waters stated that Shahan pointed out to him the site he had chosen for this magnificent church. Once again, the young cleric expressed his opposition claiming that the location “was too near the road and there would be no room for lawns or landscaping.”

The “kid” was 0 for 2. Whether it was because of this discussion or the needs of his archbishop, that June, Waters was recalled to Boston to join the faculty of the archdiocesan seminary.

Mr. Leo F. Olds, the brother of Rev. Alonzo J. Olds,

pastor of St. Augustine’s Church and the founder of the Sanctuary Choir of the parish, replaced him. Olds was enthusiastic about the project. Sadly, Olds resigned in 1915 for health reasons; he died two years later (39). Rev. Bernard A. McKenna of Philadelphia, a former student of Shahan and alumnus of the university, was then appointed secretary “with a special view to the work of the National Shrine.” The saying “third times the charm” could never have been truer. McKenna became Shahan’s right-hand-man; the most devoted champion of the National Shrine and Bishop Shahan, and the first director of the National Shrine.

The location for the National Shrine, however, was not as cut and dry as Msgr. Waters seemed

to imply. Frederick V. Murphy, who Shahan chose to establish the school of architecture, stated in a 1957 interview that Msgr. Edward A. Pace, the first dean of the School of Philosophy, offered to donate some property located on Fort Totten Hill, the location of one of the Civil War defenses that encircled the city. He added the suggestion that the Brothers of Mary from Dayton, Ohio, might also be approached about selling some of their property at that location. Shahan however, felt that the church needed to be on the premises of the university not only for the students but also for administrative reasons.

Another proposed location was where the John K. Mullen of Denver Memorial Library stands today. A detail from a 1914 lithograph shows the “university cathedral” at the center of the campus. This plan was developed by Murphy at the request of Shahan. According to Murphy, it was at this time that the idea of a “crypt church” came into focus, as it would fill in “the hollow space at the site.”

The perfect location was yet to be found. A preliminary survey of the campus grounds was made. The Olmsted Brothers, landscape



1914 Murphy-Olmsted Plan

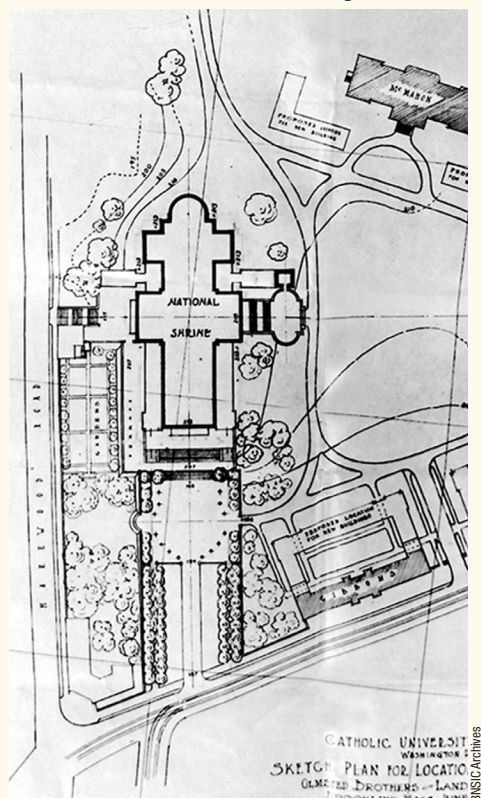
architects from Brookline, Massachusetts, made a careful study of the survey and recommended the location where the National Shrine stands today. Frederick Olmsted regarded this location as central to the university and the surrounding scholasticates and religious houses, all of which would serve and be served by the Shrine.

Even though the chosen site was on level ground, the idea of a “crypt church” had taken hold. This had a major impact on the architectural style and which part of the Shrine would first be constructed.

On 8 January 1919, the Committee on the National Shrine listed the names of eight architects for the job and discussed

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the qualifications of each: John T. Comès, Pittsburgh; Henry Dandurand Dagit (Henry D. Dagit & Sons), Philadelphia; Edward T. P. Graham, Boston; Charles R. Greco, Boston; F. Burrall Hoffman, New York and Florida; Charles D. Maginnis (Maginnis and Walsh), Brookline; Paul Monaghan, Philadelphia; Frederick V. Murphy (Murphy & Olmsted), Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia. Each nominee was esteemed in the field of church architecture. In the end, the minutes would record that by “unanimous consent,” the committee favored “a Romanesque Church” and recommended “Mr. Charles Maginnis of Boston ... as the architect of the building” with Mr. Frederick V. Murphy as associate architect. That same year, plans for the National Shrine presented by Charles Maginnis were approved and adopted at the December meeting of the Board of Trustees. The bishop trustees further authorized the Building Committee to select the material and award the contract for the construction of “the Crypt of the apse at the cost of \$280,000 more or less.” (This would be a little more than \$3.5 million in 2019.) The location was also finalized. As platted by the Olmsted Brothers on 28 June 1919, the Shrine would be located at “the western side of the University property, parallel with Harewood Avenue (Road) and five hundred feet from Michigan Avenue.”



1919 Olmsted Brothers Plan

Following a concerted effort to acquire the necessary funds to begin construction, including papal approval, a papal blessing, and even a papal donation, plans were made for the actual work to begin. As with all things, it would begin “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

The Blessing of the Site

On Sunday morning, 16 May 1920, at 9:00 a.m. more than 6,000 persons, including a delegation of 1500 Knights of Columbus from New York City and 600 members of the New York Chapter of the Daughters of Isabella, attended an open air Mass and the blessing of the site for the future National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. An *al fresco* breakfast and lunch were provided for all who attended the event.



1920 Knights of Columbus

Archbishop Giovanni Bonzano, the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, was the celebrant. After blessing the site, Archbishop Bonzano removed the cope and prepared for Mass by donning the vestments worn by Archbishop John Carroll, the father of the American hierarchy.

Mass was celebrated on a small wooden altar built in 1774 and used by Father Carroll at the family home at Forest Glen near Rock Creek in Maryland, until his elevation to the See of Baltimore in 1789. This treasured artifact became the main altar in the Crypt Church beginning with the celebration of the first public Mass on Easter Sunday, 20 April 1924, until the installation of the onyx altar in honor of Our Lady of the Catacombs (Mary Memorial Altar) in 1927.

The chalice used on this day was the first vessel made specifically for the National Shrine. It was also used at the first public Mass in the Crypt Church and on 8 December 2017, at the blessing of *The Trinity* dome mosaic, which marked the completion of the interior of the National Shrine. In addition to its use at such historical celebrations, the chalice is part of the daily rotation of sacred vessels used at the National Shrine.



Blessing of the Site

The outdoor sanctuary was situated within the outline of the Shrine that was marked by white cord strung along a series of stakes. American flags marked the angles and turns in the exterior walls. The altar stood on the spot where the baldachin altar in honor of the Immaculate Conception now stands in the Great Upper Church.

Following the Mass, Bishop Thomas J. Shahan addressed the gathering. “At the present time,” said Shahan, “when the modern world is ... given over to corruption and impurity of various kinds ... a shrine to the Immaculate Conception” is needed more than ever.

A choir of 487 voices provided the music for the solemn occasion. In addition to members of the various religious communities, 100 children from St. Vincent’s Orphan Asylum, located just south of the Shrine, were also numbered among the singers. The Rev. Dr. A. L. Gabert, professor of Plain Chant, was the director.

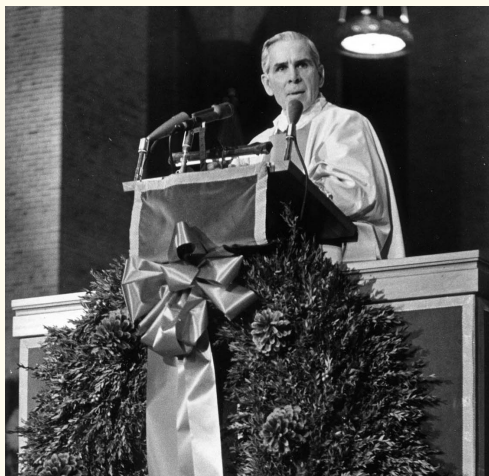


Entrance Procession

In addition to the blessing of the site, Archbishop Bonzano also blessed a statue of Joan of Arc, who was canonized in Rome concurrently. The fate of this statue is unknown. In addition to the statue, the National Shrine also received a stone from the dungeon where Saint Joan was imprisoned until her death. The stone is displayed in the Chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes.

Leading the liturgical procession that day was a cross bearer and two candle bearers, one of whom was a young priest (indicated in photo with an arrow), ordained just eight months earlier in Peoria, Illinois.

At that time, Reverend Fulton John Sheen was a theology student at the university. In his autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, Archbishop Sheen recounted a meeting with the “brilliant, gifted, saintly rector” who saw in this young priest, someone “destined to shed ... light and luster.” The relationship that began that day between this young priest and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception was to last more than a lifetime. A life-long friend of the Shrine, the broadcasts of Fulton J. Sheen from the Crypt Church, Masses and sermons in the Great Upper Church, whether nationally televised or not, contributed much to its growth.



1964 Midnight Mass

In 1989, friends and benefactors installed a marble and hand-carved wood lectern in the Crypt Church as a tribute to the memory of this man of rhetorical and philosophical eloquence. On July 6, Pope Francis approved the miracle attributed to the intercession of Venerable Fulton J. Sheen. The date of his beatification is yet to be determined.

Pilgrims and visitors are encouraged to come to the National Shrine, to walk the historic and beautiful grounds and gardens, to visit the shrines of the world under this one roof, and to pause and remember the thousands of faithful souls, the true Body of Christ, who have made and continue to make this church and this land inviolably sacred.

“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning ...” (Genesis 1:31). 🌅