

A COMMUNION OF SAINTS

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It was late winter, March, to be exact. The Alps were still crusted in snow and the sun was sparking the hoarfrost. It was beautiful—and cold! I arrived late in the afternoon at the train station in Salzburg with yet another hour's journey ahead of me. Monsignor Alois Furtner (+ 9 Sept 2020), the Administrator of the Holy Chapel in Altötting, met me and we drove by car to the “Heart of Bavaria.” Monsignor Furtner was excited. He



Pope Benedict XVI, Oratory of Altötting, BNSIC, 2008

had arranged for the donation of one of the five hand-carved exact copies of the Bavarian Madonna to the National Shrine in Washington. This was the first time one of these statues would leave Bavaria.

By the time we arrived in Altötting it was dark, and the Holy Chapel was closed. But this was my first trip to Altötting and Monsignor Furtner felt it was important that I be allowed to “greet” the Madonna upon my arrival. We walked up the gravel path to the Holy Chapel, the actual center of the city, and entered the sacristy. The sexton and staff had kindly remained on duty. Introductions were made and pleasantries exchanged. Then, I was given a privilege known



Chapel of Our Lady of Altötting, Bavaria.

to very few: to enter the Holy Chapel and to “greet” the Madonna of Altötting—alone.

The electric lights in the chapel were off for the night. My first encounter with the Madonna of Altötting would be by candlelight: an extraordinary old-world experience. I walked from the sacristy through the outer chapel guided by

the flickering devotional candles and tapers. As I touched the holy water, frozen in the font, I felt the stones beneath my feet, dimpled by the footsteps of pilgrims who had brought their petitions to this chapel, every day, for more than 1,350 years. As I entered the original part of the chapel, the oldest Marian shrine in Germany (A.D. 660), I was greeted by the sweet soft scent of bee's wax rising from the numerous burning candles that framed the reredos. Standing in her niche above the tabernacle was *Unsere Liebe Frau von Altötting*, literally, “our dear Lady of Altötting.” Hand carved of soft Linden wood (c.1330) and clothed in elegant hand-embroidered baroque garments, she dominated the chapel in spite of her small stature (25 inches). On the left, kneeling near the communion rail was a silver statue of the beloved “door keeper” of Altötting, Saint Conrad of Parzham, the Capuchin friar who was known for his spiritual wisdom and holiness. On the opposite wall, the hearts of the Bavarian kings reposed in silver vessels in perpetual devotion. The outer walls of the chapel swelled with votive offerings for prayers answered. It seemed as though I was surrounded by centuries of faithful pilgrims still whispering their prayers and chanting their rosaries. Without a doubt, there was a communion of holy men and women, a communion of saints, both living and dead, in whose midst I was welcomed.

A Communion of Saints

The sanctification of a church or a shrine is more than a rite and ritual, more than a relic or a miraculous image. The sanctification of a church or shrine is the people of God, the Church, acting in the grace of God. Long before the process of canonization, Saint Paul referred to these people as “holy ones,” as “saints.” (Rom 1:7; Phil 1:1).

Even in its “youth” of one hundred years (1920-2020), the people of God have been living and active within this National Shrine. They, too, have left their marks of dimpled stones and steps, worn wooden pews and kneelers, votive offerings and tablets. They have filled this house with a diversity of devotions to Mary, all of their own giving: prayer upon prayer, sacrifice upon sacrifice, and mite upon mite, from saint and sinner alike.

On 23 September 1920, thousands gathered in northeast Washington for the ceremonial placing of the first stone of the National Shrine. In addition to the required dignitaries and celebrities who attended the event were the faithful,

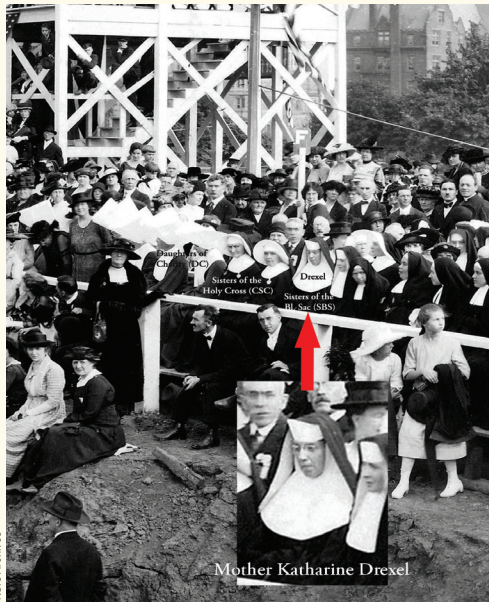


Father Thomas A. Judge

the members of the Church of whom Father Thomas A. Judge, CM, once wrote, "In the ordinary providence of your everyday lives, you are the Church and you have the grace. ... where you are, there is the Church." Father Judge, the pioneer of the lay apostolate and the founder of two missionary congregations, had been in town for a meeting with the Apostolic Delegate regarding the canonical status of his communities. Father Judge later wrote that while he was at Trinity College visiting one of

his sisters, "*God favored me in an opportunity of being present at the most impressive ceremonies of the laying of the [foundation] stone of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. My time was spent adoring and thanking the most adorable Trinity for the graces given to our Blessed Mother and for this event*" (Letter, 23 Sept 1920). Many years later, Father Judge and his labors in the Church in America were honored in stained-glass in the upper sacristy. In 1963, the cause for the canonization of Thomas A. Judge was initiated by Most Reverend Patrick A. O'Boyle, Archbishop of Washington, D.C.

The city of Philadelphia was well represented at the Foundation Stone ceremony. Three of the five members of the building committee were Philadelphians: Archbishop (later Cardinal)



Mother Drexel at Foundation Stone Ceremony

Dennis Dougherty, chairman; James J. Ryan; and Walter George Smith, the brother-in-law of Mother Katharine Drexel. Although there is no written record of Mother Drexel at the ceremony, her participation was recently confirmed in a panorama photograph of that day. Mother Drexel stood elbow to elbow with other vowed religious women at the railing along the eastern rise of the grand basin near the pulpit.



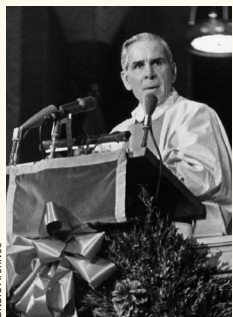
Saint Katharine Drexel

The step-mother of Katharine Drexel, Emma Mary Bouvier Drexel, the sister of the great grandfather of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, raised the Drexel girls as her own and was one of the most influential persons in their lives. By her example, Katharine learned from an early age to use her wealth for the benefit of others. In 1891, prompted by her concern for the Native Americans and at the urging of Pope Leo XIII, Katherine founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. In 2000, Pope (Saint) John Paul II, himself a pilgrim to the National Shrine in 1969, 1976, and 1979, canonized Mother Drexel. The Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the Black and Indian Mission Office, and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament donated a life-size statue of their sainted daughter to the National Shrine. It stands in the Hall of American Saints. Mother Drexel is also depicted in a stained-glass window in the

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lower sacristy (1998) and on the west side of *The Trinity* dome mosaic (2017) in the Great Upper Church.

In addition to Father Judge and Mother Drexel, the following names, in chronological order according to their first visit, are those known persons who have been present among us at the National Shrine and who have prayed privately and corporately with us.



BNSIC Archives

Bishop Sheen, Christmas 1964

1920, Reverend (later Archbishop) Fulton J. Sheen, from 16 May 1920, when a newly ordained Father Sheen served at the Mass for the blessing of the land of the National Shrine, until his death in 1979, Fulton J. Sheen was an active promoter and contributor to the life of

the National Shrine, particularly through his preaching — both from the pulpit and on television broadcasts from the Crypt Church. He was the first recipient of the Patronal Medal in 1974. His cause was opened in 2004.



Library of Congress

Dorothy Day, 1934

1932, Dorothy Day, suffragist, and co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. In her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness* (1952), Dorothy wrote, “*When the demonstration was over and I had finished writing my story*

[for America and Commonweal magazines], I went to the National Shrine ... on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. There I offered up a special prayer, a prayer which came with tears and with anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor. And when I returned to New York, I found Peter Maurin ...” Years later, Dorothy said God answered her prayers and that “[the Shrine is] really where it all started.” Her cause was opened in 2005.

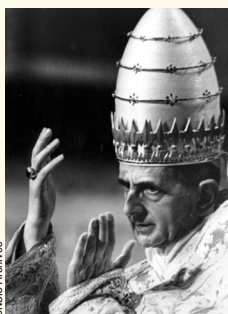
1936, Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli, Papal Secretary of State, and the future Pope Pius XII, visited the National Shrine and offered a private prayer at the Chapel of the Good Shepherd in the Crypt Church. In 1950, invoking papal



BNSIC Archives

The Assumption Mosaic (Titian)

infallibility, Pius XII defined the dogma of the Assumption of Mary. The gift of *The Assumption* mosaic was initiated by Pius XII. His cause was opened in 1990.



BNSIC Archives

Pope Paul VI, 30 June 1963

1960, Giovanni Cardinal Montini, Archbishop of Milan and future Saint Paul VI, was en route to Washington when he spotted the great dome of the National Shrine from the air and asked if he could be brought to the National Shrine before beginning his official one-day visit.

Standing in the Great Upper Church, he remarked, “The strength of this beautiful Shrine is much more than its massive dimensions; to me it represents America’s deep faith in Christ and his Blessed Mother.” In 1968, the coronation tiara of Pope Paul VI, which he donated to the poor of the world in 1964, was permanently housed in the National Shrine and continues to beget donations for the poor. He was canonized in 2018.

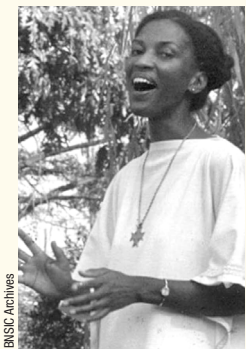


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Josyf Cardinal Slipyj

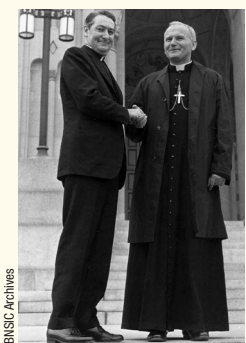
1968, Josyf Cardinal Slipyj, Patriarch in exile of Lviv, Ukraine, Eastern Rite of the Catholic Church, was imprisoned and tormented in the Siberian Gulag and Mordovia (1945-63); condemned to death 37 times in 18 years. He participated in Vatican

II; died in Rome, 1984. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, his remains were translated to the Cathedral of Saint George, Lviv (1992). He visited the National Shrine and saw the Vatican II mosaic in the East Apse of the Great Upper Church, in which he is featured. His cause was opened in 1991.



Sr. Thea Bowman, FSPA

1968/9, Sister Thea (Bertha) Bowman, FSPA, like so many students and professors of English at The Catholic University, Sister Thea came to the National Shrine for the Sacraments and private prayer. A convert to Catholicism and the granddaughter of a slave, Thea was an extraordinary preacher and evangelist; an advocate for racial and social justice who emphasized diversity, coupled with the importance of love. In 1989, wheelchair-bound because of bone cancer, Sister Thea became the first African American woman to address the U.S. Bishops Conference on race and Catholicism. She died the following year. Her cause was opened in 2018.



Msgr. McDonough and Cardinal Wojtyla 1969

1969, Karol Cardinal Wojtyla, Archbishop of Krakow and the future Saint John Paul II visited the National Shrine for the first time. In 1976, Cardinal Wojtyla celebrated Mass in the Great Upper Church; in 1979 he became the first pope to visit the National Shrine. He was canonized in 2014.

1971, Father Patrick Peyton, CSC, the "Rosary Priest" was a frequent participant at the National Rosary Pilgrimage at the National Shrine. In 1980, he received the Patronal Medal for his many efforts towards Marian devotion. His cause was opened in 2001.



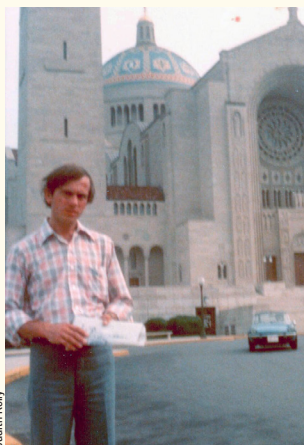
Fr. Peyton and Mother Teresa praying the rosary together.

1972, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, MC, founder of the Missionaries of Charity, a missionary community that serves the poorest of the poor worldwide. She visited the National Shrine several times as a speaker for religious conferences and for the profession of her sisters. Mother Teresa was awarded the Patronal Medal in 1979. She was canonized in 2016.



Cardinal Mindszenty, March 1974

1974, Jozef Cardinal Mindszenty, Primate of Hungary in exile, celebrated Mass and Confirmation in the Great Upper Church for the American-Hungarian Community and urged fidelity to the Blessed Mother, Patroness of Hungary. Mindszenty was a defender of human rights and a foe of both fascism and communism, having suffered cruelly under both regimes. His cause was opened in 2019.



Fr. Jerzy, 26 July 1976

1974, Reverend Jerzy Popieluszko, chaplain and later martyr of the Solidarity movement in Poland, visited twice and offered Mass in Our Lady of Good Counsel Chapel. His assassination (1984) was mourned by Pope John Paul II. He was beatified in Warsaw in 2010.

So begins the Litany of the Saints of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. For one hundred years the National Shrine has been a place of prayer, spiritual solace and comfort, of sacramental joy and grace for generations. Undoubtedly, there are saints among us who have yet to be called forth and those whose names we will never know. In prayer and faith, let us remember all who have gone before us and who continue to pray with us and inspire us. This is our litany, our communion of saints. 🙏