

From COVID to Covenant

“You are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” (Ephesians 2:19(b)-20)

One hundred and eighteen years ago Fr. J.H. Emard O.M.I. bought a piece of land from a Catholic farmer, Karl Kusch. Within a year, a team of Oblate brothers and local volunteers headed by Frank Kusch, Karl’s son, were building a house for Fr. Paul Guerin O.M.I. the pastor of the new parish, to be dedicated to St. Paul. A small church soon followed. It stood where the Global Gathering Place is now, facing west. The first mass was celebrated in this church on July 26, 1903 – and on this site the Holy Mass has been offered every day since.



For the next thirty years, the story of the Catholic Faith in Saskatoon is mainly the story of St. Paul’s Parish. The little church – that served as a hospital during the typhoid pandemic of 1905, soon was unable to accommodate the booming congregation. In 1910, during a ceremony attended by 2,000 people, Sir Wilfred Laurier, Prime Minister of Canada laid the foundation stone in the presence of Bishop Pascal. One year later, the pastor – Fr. Vachon, O.M.I. – was able to move the celebration of Mass from the basement into the new church designed by the architect of the Legislature in Regina, J.E. Fortin. Dedicated on the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1911, the local press reported,



“St. Paul’s Church . . . has appealed to all as an architectural achievement of standard and classical merit. Built in the pure Romanesque style there is not throughout the west a church of more pleasing aspect. Quite recently a visitor from France who has more than a passing knowledge of the world’s church architecture, expressed himself as satisfied that from a Romanesque standpoint the church left nothing to be desired. The slated roof is something new in the city and there is that suggestion of substance about the outer decoration that satisfies the eye. When the stained-glass windows are inserted the building will form a worthy and unique addition to the city’s architectural assets.”¹

This church building was to become a refuge during war, drought, and another pandemic – the Spanish Flu – and to be the anchor for newly arrived Catholic immigrants (like my grandfather). From this parish was birthed new communities in Saskatoon – St. Joseph’s and St.

¹ Quoted in Duncan Robertson’s informative book, *The Sword of St. Paul: A History of the Diocese of Saskatoon, 1933-1983*, (Episcopal Corp of Saskatoon, 1982), pg. 128.

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Mary's. It was fitting that in 1933 this temple of faith became the Cathedral Church of the newly erected diocese of Saskatoon. As Co-Cathedral, she remains the mother church for the People of God – at the spiritual heart of Saskatoon.



Interior c. 1930

Spot the Differences



Interior c. 1949



Interior c. 1967

This is the 110th anniversary of this Co-Cathedral. It is a strong building, great foundations, with a structure well-tended by generations of faithful. The green slate roof imported from Maine is gone, but before my arrival new shingles and roof repair has left this building water proof! The interior, however, has been quite radically changed over the years. The 26-foot-high, 14-foot-wide High Altar that took a year to build at a cost of \$1,026,000 dollars in today's money – was removed during the ill-informed if enthusiastic iconoclastic days after the Second Vatican Council. Broken up in the 1960's along with the magnificent pulpit (another priceless work of liturgical art), most of the statues and all the frescos, it has disappeared.



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A fire on April 27, 1976 saw the renovations of 1971 damaged, six stain glass windows and the St. Joseph chapel destroyed. During the rebuilding the stain glass in the large windows was installed just in time for Christmas Eve.



Complete renovations were undertaken in 1986. In 1996, the wonderful welcome area added and the kitchen and basement redone. A new boiler installed. These were grand contributions of former generations – a sign that this downtown parish has been a vital one.



Our parish continues to grow. Have you noticed the number of new Canadians that are filling our pews? They arrive by plane and by birth! This COVID year has been a birthing and baptizing year as well. Ten new Catholics at the Easter Vigil! We are all straining at the constraints of the health leash to return to the joy of a lively community where elders and youth, Inner city and suburbs, Liturgy and service meet. So, I am asking you – this new generation of St. Paul's – is this a moment to renew our place of worship?



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After 35 years, there are some clear issues that present themselves:

- the altar furnishings and baptismal font are showing their age.
- The carpet of the sanctuary and the sacristy are worn.
- The floor under both the sanctuary and the sacristy are severely in need of replacement.
- The confessionals must be rebuilt in order to comply with the guidelines of our Covenant of Care.
- The sacristy needs a refurbishing – there is no *sacrarium* which is required.
- The 1976 great windows are needing either replacement or complete restoration – there is serious loss of heat/cooling in the seasons of Saskatchewan.
- Energy efficiencies are also required for our lighting system.

This year a pandemic has confronted us – but through the intercession of St. Paul, our parish community was strong, growing, and engaged as we faced this challenge. This piece of the Kusch farm anchors still a community that brings into the saving worship of God into the heart of our city. Our Diocesan plan to *Proclaim Christ and God's Kingdom Today* calls us to “make every Sunday matter” – to create inspiring, beautiful, dynamic worship that brings the Good News to people. I see that this is precisely what is happening in our house of many houses that is a people who “*are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*” I believe that it is the hour to make our temple – this Co-Cathedral – more inspiring, more beautiful, and more dynamic for the welcoming worship that impels us proclaim Christ in love and service.

There is no question of “going backwards” in our liturgy or our worship. The vision of Vatican II, to release the dynamism of the early Church engaging all Christians in joyful celebration, brings us to a new moment *with the architectural foundations of our origins*. This Romanesque cathedral cries out for respect for its integrity and expression of its living story of the beauty of worshipping God. The beauty of worship is the source of our desire to transform our world with the beauty of justice.

So – after thorough consultation with the Pastoral and Financial committees – I propose that we as a parish dream together how to make our building express for our city the glory of Christ. Since He is the *Cornerstone*, this dream becomes action if we do it *with His Mind*. I believe that this is a graced time of experiencing unity of purpose and hope. Pope Francis warns us against “clericalism” so I am calling us all to a course of consultation and co-responsibility. We have engaged the expertise of Henry Dowling Architects to lead us through a process of engagement that **begins with the survey you have before you**. It is the vital step in seeing how this community wishes to engage this project. I pray that it will be an exciting experience of the Holy Spirit at work *joining us together as we grow into a holy temple in the Lord*.

Fr. Stefano Penna

Rector-Pastor of St. Paul's Co-Cathedral

April 16, 2021

