

<https://www.thechurchnews.com/2019/5/3/23215015/how-an-1879-mass-held-in-the-st-george-tabernacle-sparked-todays-latter-day-saintcatholic-partnershi>

# How an 1879 Mass held in the St. George Tabernacle sparked today's Latter-day Saint/Catholic partnerships

By Scott Taylor, May 3, 2019



Bishop Oscar A. Solis (center, at podium), Catholic Diocese, Salt Lake City, speaks on the topic of Building Relationships Between Faith Communities at the Historic Interfaith Tribute at the St. George Tabernacle in St. George, Utah on Thursday, May 2, 2019. Credit: Nick Adams, For the Deseret News, For the Deseret News

ST. GEORGE, Utah — The celebration of Mass in the St. George Tabernacle in 1879 sparked an ongoing relationship between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Catholic Church, with words spoken and gestures of kindness and service replicated today — not only in Utah, but across the country and the globe.

It has become, to borrow an oft-used phrase, “the gift that keeps on giving.”

Counsel given by Catholic Father Lawrence Scanlan at the start of the 1879 Mass sounds very similar to the insight shared by President Russell M. Nelson after the Latter-day Saint leader met with Pope Francis in the Vatican earlier this year.

The St. George choir singing the Mass in Latin for the visiting Catholic miners 140 years ago has been returned in kind today by a Catholic organist in Italy who has arranged his schedule in order to play for the parish’s services on Sunday afternoons and to provide piano accompaniment Sunday mornings for a small Latter-day Saint branch nearby.

Even the distances seems strikingly similar — the Catholic miners in Utah’s Silver Reef traveling 20 miles to attend Mass in a Latter-day Saint building, and the Catholic accompanist covering 25 miles each Sunday to play at a Latter-day Saint sacrament meeting.

“One-hundred-forty years ago, it started right here,” said Elder Craig C. Christensen, a General Authority Seventy and president of the Church’s Utah Area, who added “we have a long-lasting legacy of working together.”

He and other Latter-day Saint and Catholic leaders gathered to commemorate that Mass — one of the first celebrated in what is now the state of Utah — in an interfaith tribute held Thursday, May 2, at the same St. George Tabernacle.

Also speaking were Bishop Oscar A. Solis, bishop of the Diocese of Salt Lake; Elder Steven E. Snow, a General Authority Seventy and Church Historian and Recorder; and Reverend Monsignor Terence Moore, who retired after more than a half-century of service in the diocese and parishes in Utah.

All acknowledged how the two faiths continue to build on the gesture of 140 years earlier.

In the late 1870s, St. George was a thriving Latter-day Saint community in Utah's southwest corner, the jewels being the recently finished temple and tabernacle. Twenty miles to the north, silver had been discovered — the area earning the name “Silver Reef” — with a good number of Catholics among the myriads drawn by the mining.

With a Catholic church there still under construction, Father Scanlan — who oversaw the faith's efforts throughout the western territory comprised by modern-day Utah and Nevada — inquired if Mass might be celebrated in the St. George Tabernacle. Erastus Snow, the Latter-day Saint apostle overseeing the Church's mission in Utah's Dixie, agreed.

St. George choirmaster John M. Macfarlane, who knew Father Scanlan from his work as a land surveyor and having shared boarding house accommodations in the Silver Reef area, led his choir in acquiring the Mass music and practicing the Latin lyrics for several weeks. Macfarlane is known for penning the Christmas hymn “Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains” and composing “Dearest Children, God Is Near You.”

On May 25, 1879 (some say the date was May 18), miners having traveled the 20-mile distance were joined at Mass by several thousand curious Latter-day Saints. Prior to the start, Father Scanlan stood and said to his Latter-day Saint hosts, noting doctrinal differences: “I think you are wrong, and you think I am wrong, but this should not prevent us from treating each other with due consideration and respect.”

Said Elder Snow, born and raised in St. George and a great-great-great-grandson of Erastus Snow: “I think that kind of counsel is every bit as effective in today's world.”

Elder Snow recounted the story of Alfredo Filippella, which he also shared at last year's rededication services of the St. George Tabernacle.

After visiting with Latter-day Saint missionaries almost a decade ago, Filippella learned from reading a book about the faith of the 1879 Mass and looked for a way in his native Italy to return the favor. An organist for his parish in Salerno, he arranged to play for Catholic services on Sunday afternoons so he could serve as

pianist for the small Latter-day Saint congregation on Sunday mornings 40 kilometers away in Battipaglia.

“I love how acts of kindness can come back, even 140 years later,” said Elder Snow, adding in comments to the Church News: “It’s the best example of Christ-like service; in my view, it’s even better than the original story. . . . he’s more than made up for the fact that we let them use the tabernacle that one afternoon.”

In his remarks, Monsignor Moore added several other “rest of the story” experiences of his Catholic/Latter-day Saint relationships, from the helping to pack clothes at Welfare Square to his friendships and working associations with the late Church President Thomas S. Monson and former Presiding Bishop H. David Burton. He specifically cited receiving individual attention from President Monson after being diagnosed with leukemia, an interaction he described as being “with such compassion and in a personal way that I was left teary-eyed.”

He added: “He blessed me and prayed with me. I felt such a healing presence in my heart and in my soul, and I’m eternally grateful for that.”

Bishop Solis called the 1879 hosting of Mass “interesting and inspiring” and the start of “a journey of hope” in relationships between the two faiths.

“What seems inconceivable becomes credible; what people deem impossible becomes possible; and what a man can only dream becomes a reality,” he said, expressing gratitude for the “great gesture of hospitality” that has fostered “a close bond and fellowship.”

Both Catholic leaders spoke of long-time Latter-day Saint partnerships in Catholic Community Services in Salt Lake City and throughout Utah as well as the global humanitarian partnerships between Catholic Relief Services and LDS Charities.

Elder Christensen linked the historic Mass with Pope Francis’ recent hosting of President Nelson on March 9.

“The differences in doctrine are real,” he quoted President Nelson as saying of the Vatican visit. “They are important. But they are not nearly as important as things we have in common.”

That acknowledgement of differences and the invitation to come together on common ground run parallel to those of Father Scanlan from 1879, he noted.

Elder Christensen listed the shared values and efforts — the concern for human suffering, the desire for religious liberty for all, the importance of building bridges of friendship and the significance of families and youth coming to God.

The May 2 commemoration was held on the same day as the National Day of Prayer. So, with the recounting of past connections and present-day partnerships, what would be the hopes and prayers of Bishop Solis and Elder Christensen for the future of Catholic/Latter-day Saint relationships?

“There is a tremendous potential of good in the relationships that will benefit our community — not only in Utah, but all over the world,” Bishop Solis told the Church News, underscoring the humanitarian partnerships. “It really is a strong witness of our collaboration, our combination of serving humanity and serving other people — a very good witness to the world that when we pull ourselves together, what a big difference it will make to create a better world for everyone.”

He called the 1879 Mass “a little seed” that has grown to a closer collaboration between many faiths. “It opens the door to so many possibilities.”

Elder Christensen said “we already work so closely together that sometimes you can’t distinguish between the two.”

He added: “As President Nelson said in Rome to the Pope, we just want to go out and do good things together, to put our differences that exist aside and find this unity.”