



100 Years in Orange: The Ballroom Becomes a Chapel

Mother Bernard had done a good deal of building in Eureka before the congregation moved to Orange in 1922. In the eight years between 1912 and 1920, she had overseen the building of a large convent and an elementary school. In addition, the Sisters in Eureka had started to expand a small hospital, helping to dig out the basement themselves.

For that reason, it's possible that when Mother Bernard first visited the Burnham mansion in 1921, the grand ballroom itself, might have become the purchase point for her. I can imagine her walking into the lofty ballroom of the Burnham estate, taking in its height, length and breadth -- claiming silently and joyfully in her heart, "This will be our chapel." Who could have imagined that a chapel came with the property!

Mother Bernard had an artistic bent. It was not challenging for her to imagine the ballroom as a sacred space. She knew what the sanctuary should look like -- where the altar should be, the tabernacle, and the number of pews that would be needed.

She chose a décor, no doubt, that inspired her. On the sanctuary wall, behind the altar, a large plaster-cast image of Jesus, risen from the dead, held command. He was surrounded by clouds and angels, the angels, of course, holding bouquets of small lights which could be lit at times of celebration. Mother Bernard, as foundress, had her own niche, a place where she could pray, even at night when the rest of the house was fast asleep. This was where she brought her worries and fears, where she put her concerns into God's hands. She may have shed tears there as well. This chapel, was for her, a very sacred space.

When it was announced in 1955, that a new and larger chapel was to be built, Mother Bernard was deeply unsettled. What was wrong with the current chapel, the old ballroom, where the Sisters gathered for Mass and prayers each day, where she had prayed each day since 1922? The abandonment of the current chapel felt disrespectful to her in every way.

In her distress, Mother Bernard wrote a letter to Archbishop McIntyre in Los Angeles pleading with him to use his authority to stop Mother Felix's building project.

While Archbishop McIntyre wisely chose not to interfere with the inner workings of our congregation, he did take the time to write Mother Bernard a condolence letter, telling her that he sympathized with her grief. He told her that he had had a similar experience at one time, and had been consoled by the fact that some of the elements of the chapel that he revered had been passed on to a place where they could be used and respected. She didn't write him again on this topic.

The new chapel was named Sacred Heart in deference to her devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Did that console her? Possibly not. She was buried from Sacred Heart Chapel in January 1961.