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ST STEPHEN'S: A CHURCH WITH EIGHT LIVES

By Monsignor Raymond Renwald, printed in the November 4, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*

St. Stephen Church and school at 3rd and O was the center of such fervent religious life in Sacramento and spawned so many apostolic ventures during the 60 years of its existence that we can literally say it had eight lives. It was typical of many church centers of this same period in the diocese – simple beginnings which grew and grew and branched out like the mustard seed in the gospel.

Acquired by the Cathedral in 1906, legend has it that it was the carriage house of the Crocker Mansion. Standing on the corner of 3rd and O Streets, it was only a stone's throw from the Crocker Mansion (now Crocker Art Gallery). It was remodeled to serve as a school and a church (auxiliary to the Cathedral). These two functions it fulfilled from 1906-1922. From 1909 to 1913, St Stephen's served as the Portuguese National Church. The first baptism by Father John Azevedo was that of Joseph Viega in St. Stephen's church on October 24, 1909. The Portuguese community built St. Elizabeth Church in 1913 and this church has served as the Portuguese National Church in Sacramento ever since.

In 1922 St. Stephen's became the church for the Slavonian Catholics of Sacramento. When the last Slavonian priest had returned to his country and no other came, the building was eventually sold to a Japanese group who used it for a theater. In the meantime, two other projects initiated in the old St. Stephen are developed on new sites: Grace Day Home and the Japanese Mission.

During World War II the 3rd and O property reverted to the diocese. When peace was declared, the building was remodeled and became Our Lady of Guadalupe Church for the Mexican community. It served in this capacity until 1959 when the present Guadalupe church was completed at 7th and T Street. In 1959 the building was again fixed up, this time to house the Filipino Sisters and to serve as a center for the Filipino apostolate. When this Center was moved to 1123 W in 1962, old St Stephen's became the Cursillo Center. It wound up its career as a hostel for unemployed single men. On June 21, 1967 the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency purchased the property and razed the building. Let's look at those eight phases in more detail.

PHASE I: SCHOOL AND CHURCH

St. Stephen's became such a potent vehicle of the apostolate in the beginning because of the Franciscan Sisters who answered Bishop Grace's call to staff it. Four sisters came but only 40 students; discouraging, perhaps, but not disheartening for Mother Henrietta and Sisters Tarcissia, Melanie and Theophila. They made an impression on the children and the people so that the enrollment had risen to 100 by the end of September and 200 by the end of the year. The Sisters had to commute daily from their convent on 26th and K, but local residents were not

long in recognizing their value and assisted with the transportation. By 1908, a convent had been built next to the school.



Diocesan Archives: taken in 1949

**St Stephen School, 3rd and O Streets, Sacramento
Founded by the Franciscan Sisters in 1906**

By 1910, the enrollment had passed the 300 mark and stayed that way until the new school was built on the 8th and S site in January 1924. Many of our solid citizens of Sacramento today attended St Stephen's and love to reminisce about it. The church also was a happy gathering place and the priests who said Mass there were always glad for the assignment. They served a happy and devoted people.

The zeal that has characterized St. Stephen's continued to operate in the new school at 8th and S, now called "Cathedral Parish School of the Holy Angels." It served the second generation of

St Stephen's pupils. So it was not surprising that when Monsignor Gerald O'Driscoll built an auditorium for the school in 1949, parents insisted that it be called "St. Stephen's Auditorium" in memory of its progenitor. And so St Stephen's has not died, but continues to serve Our Lady of Guadalupe Church as its parish hall.

Before we close the chapter on St. Stephen's school we must recall that during the flu epidemic of 1818-19 St. Stephen's was used as a sort of hospital for people of the area, caring particularly for a great number of children.

PHASE II: GRACE DAY HOME

As St. Stephen's acclimatized itself to the community, people found other uses for it than just schooling and worship. Day care was one. It started with five year old Leonora Santos. Her parents came to Sacramento in May of 1915 and started a restaurant in the rough part of town. Wishing gentler care for their daughter, they brought her to the Sisters and simply left her for day care. The little child was so impressed by the loving solicitude the Sisters showed for her and talked so much about that she not only brought her parents back to the practice of the faith, but established St. Stephen's as a haven for the little ones even though she died at the end of the year. Parents just left more and more children in the school yard when they went to work. Often they would send them with their older brothers and sisters to be dropped off on their way to school.



Photo by John E Boll, 2013

Grace Day Home, Named for Bishop Thomas Grace

Mother Pacifica did not have the heart to send them away. When the cannery was opened at 2nd and P Streets, she saw that the problem would be an enduring one in 1917. Friends and the cannery manager sent food. This convinced the Sisters that there was need for an entirely separate facility and invited people to support this cause promising that they would be remembered in their prayers for benefactors. By the end of 1919, \$16,000 had been collected.

After two years of conducting a day home for children at St. Stephen's, the Sisters were ready to go ahead with a full blown facility. The cornerstone for Grace Day Home was laid on May 5, 1920, and the building was completed by December 1920. It would take volumes to document all the good that was done for the community by this day home for children of working mothers. The donated services of the Sisters plus the aid from the Community Chest kept the fees at a nominal level and proved a priceless boon to the poor families of Sacramento.

To be continued next week.