

Speech about the Cathedral of the Prairie

by Joseph Morgan

Imagine...you are driving on Highways 47 or 20 with endless prairie stretching as far as the eye can see. Then seemingly out of nowhere, you see twin spires that are reaching towards the heavens. These are the steeples of what I believe is a great American landmark. Let me share with you the beauty, and magnificence of this awesome structure.

The Cathedral of the Prairies has so many details that have been put into it, which makes it a great sight to behold. For example, the main entrance has massive solid oak doors with overlying gargoyle drains. There are exquisite Stations of the Cross that run along the sides of both walls, twelve very large stained glass windows, which depict the life of Christ from his birth to his Ascension. There are also three huge bells weighing 1800, 1300, 850 lbs. that rest in the 140 ft. twin steeples. These are just a few of the articulate and gorgeous details that make the cathedral a legacy.

St. Anthony of Padua's Parish, which is also known as, The Cathedral of the Prairies, is located in Hoven, South Dakota. Hoven is a town of 522 people, and is an hour and a half drive from there to the nearest McDonalds. Although that may be, the determination of its people is great and so is the Pride of having this big monument in this small town. Here is a brief history of this well- loved monument.

In the early 1880's, the Hoven parish was considered a mission. Priests came only twice a year. Of course this was before the Cathedral of the Prairies was even built. But in 1912, all of that changed during the priesthood of Father Anthony Helmbrecht, when he suggested that since the old church had been structurally unsound, after being damaged by a tornado that they tear it down and build a basement for a new one. Then when funds were available, the upper half was to be built. Please keep in mind that they did this all through volunteer labor and equipment. The whole basement took about 496 days to complete. In the next three years, door to door donations were obtained to build the upper part of the cathedral.

Then in 1920, there was enough money to begin work on the new church .It was completed in time for Easter in1921. When the church was dedicated, on June 1 of 1923, the Bishop showed his admiration for the holy temple to God that had been built by this small town in the last 15 years.

Years passed, many things wore down the cathedral, and it had become only a shadow of how beautiful it once had been. Then in June of 1981, major restoration of the church began. When the Parish learned from a contractor just how much money they would have to raise to hire professional restoration services, they decided to take matters into their own hands. My great-grandfather designed and helped built the scaffolding that was needed for my grand mother to help scrub the ceiling. Then parish volunteers traced all of the murals to make stencils. They then laid on their backs about 3 stories off the ground, painting the murals on the ceilings. Pews, floors, and doors were stripped and varnished, statues were repainted, certain areas had to be re-plastered and repaired, the ceiling lights were rewired, and the attic was insulated. These are just a fraction of the areas of repair that again had to be re-done all by volunteers who altogether put in 20,000 hours of working on the church.

This landmark is a testament to the hard work and determination of people who wanted to leave something of themselves behind. It is a legacy, a symbol of their faith. This is the very spirit in which our country was formed; small groups of people, who work together to accomplish feats that are all but impossible.

The effort and detail that has been put into the Cathedral of the Prairies demonstrates the pride that the town of Hoven has in their community and the faith and love for God in their hearts. They all understand the sacrifice that their forefathers underwent to create such an immense cathedral in the vast, desolate prairie. This monument has gone through much, and stands for hope and spirit encouraging confidence and inspiration it has shown it is here to stay. Its message to us is, "We Believe. We Believe in faith, and in community. We believe that ALL is possible when we work together." And we are all challenged to do the same.

In conclusion, I encourage you to visit this great mark upon the land to see for yourselves, why I believe it is a great American landmark.

*Joseph Morgan gave this speech for the Modern Woodmen speech contest as a 6th grader at John Paul II elementary school in Mitchell, SD. He placed 3rd in the District and competed at the Region level.*