

Ridgefield Legacy Stories

~ Fr. Paul Kimball ~ The Ridgefield Seminary and the Cardboard Cathedral ~

In the 1960's, long before the Society of St. Pius X knew Ridgefield, CT, my father, William J. Kimball, worked as an architect for Fletcher Thompson on the Manresa Retreat House in Ridgefield to design its new wing. In 1979 the Society purchased this same property to build the Seminary in Ridgefield and our family drove an hour and forty-five minutes each way to attend Mass in the basement chapel.

A few years after the Seminary was established Fr. Sandborn consulted with my father about building a church. My father estimated that the building would cost a million dollars, even at that time. In later years he was asked to design the main entry way and porch for what is now Christ the King Church.

In 1983, while on vacation from Worcester Polytechnic Institute, my roommate and I knelt in the basement chapel when Archbishop Lefebvre soon afterwards knelt in the pew in front of us. I asked my Novus Ordo roommate if he knew who he was. As he did not, I said, "That is the most important man in the world." He immediately understood.

That same year I entered the seminary in Ridgefield. The "cardboard cathedral," as we seminarians kiddingly called the unfinished church, housed some of the first U.S. Society ordinations. I was privileged to play the trumpet for the annual "Trumpet Voluntary" recessional. The Archbishop commented that he liked brass for the big occasions.

The seminary moved to Winona in 1988, where I was ordained. The "cardboard cathedral," back in Ridgefield was still unfinished and was cleaned up to hold my first Mass. I remember years earlier that I helped to paint the marbled wooden altar along with a seminarian who, while he was carefully painting its back section said, "This part only God will see." Before my first Mass, I prayed that the church could somehow be finished. The roof was put on with borrowed money from Switzerland and the temporary exterior used to enclose the church back in 1984 was badly weathered. What a joy it was years later to see a real marble altar, stained glass windows etc. in Christ the King Church. It seemed like a minor miracle that it should finally be built, having been vacant for so many years. Early Society years knew many struggles. The wind blew, but the building stood. The structure is a microcosm of the Church, symbolic of the struggles and triumph of the universal Church.

It was on that property in Ridgefield where I made my first retreat to decide my life. I brought with me to the retreat a frisbee, a hacksack, a swimsuit and juggling balls. As we drove to Ridgefield my mother told me that the retreat would be in silence. I looked so shocked that she asked me whether I wanted to turn around. I replied, "No, Mom. I can handle it."

It was in Ridgefield that we seminarians often saw the Archbishop to our great joy. It was from him that I received my minor orders, and my confirmation back in 1976. Seminary life in Ridgefield was a little heaven. We seminarians used to crowd around the solarium wood stove to keep warm, as Lake Mamasco typically froze before the heating system was turned on each winter. It was indeed a humble but tightly knit family. As our holy founder wrote, a good seminary life will be a source of strength and support for the priest for the rest of his life. Ridgefield has certainly produced "Priests for Tomorrow."

Fr. Paul Kimball was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1964 and moved to Higganum, Connecticut in 1976. He was ordained in the first ordinations at Winona in 1989. He was assigned as chaplain to St. Mary's College, teaching theology and philosophy. In 1996 he became the chaplain to the Sisters of the Society of St. Pius X at Sacred Heart Novitiate in Browerville, Minnesota. In 2006 he was the prior at the Asian District House in Singapore. In 2009 he became prior of St. Saviour's Retreat House in Bristol, England. In 2013 he taught in St. John the Baptist School in Roodepoort, South Africa, traveling often to Cape Town, Lesotho, and Namibia. Currently he is assigned to St. Joseph's Priory in Harare, Zimbabwe.

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~ Fr. John Jenkins ~

As a young man still inflamed with the zeal of the Ignatian Retreat so many years ago, the voice of Father prior to me was more than just the daily assignment: "Go help with the building" -- it was symbolic of my future vocation. The building was Christ the King Church, at that time was still incomplete. Much needed to be done. The pillars beneath the altar had to be strengthened to support the weight of the immense marble structure upon it, the entire floor resurfaced, the roof and siding replaced. We had to make the building suitable for the great Guest Who would soon dwell therein, and what an enormous and yet joyous work in which to take part.

The construction of Christ the King Church was perhaps the place where I understand best the vocation of the priest: to build up the Kingdom of Heaven. The house of God is as it were heaven on earth, for it houses the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. The priest's vocation is to bring grace to souls, making them Temples of the Holy Ghost. Yet the physical manifestation of this vocation is often as simple as constructing a place where the Holy Sacrifice can be offered. An earthly father begins his vocation by building a home for his family - and so also a young man will learn what it means to be a spiritual father in providing a home for His Lord and his future spiritual children. Many young men have passed through Ridgefield to learn this practical reality. I hope and pray that the faithful in Ridgefield have the generosity to preserve that which they have been given, so that it can be transmitted to others!

"Fr. John Jenkins worked as a lay oblate in Ridgefield for two years before entering the seminary in Winona. After his ordination he has spent his priesthood in the missions of Eastern Europe and Africa where he has established many mission centers and several priories".

~ Fr. Michael McMahon ~

"*The Retreat House.*" How often these words echoed through the McMahon home! Preceded of course by: "*The Seminary!*" This wonderful place of faith and grace played a central role in our young lives with such a lasting impact that the good God alone can measure. In 1973 my dear parents recognized the towering figure of Archbishop Lefebvre and began to support his newly born work in Switzerland. The excitement was palpable when we learned that the SSPX seminary would come to Connecticut in 1978. Not ones to be hearers only but doers as well, my parents dutifully led us to 209 Tackora Trail before a single seminarian, cleaning and preparing for their much-anticipated arrival. Once they settled in, my mother Alice made the hour drive every Friday and Saturday to prepare the main meal for priests and students for the next 4 four years. My teenage years were filled with that same hour trip from West Haven, CT to Ridgefield for Solemn Masses, processions and of course ordinations!

The loss of the seminary to Winona was surely a trial to bear, yet the sacrifice would be amply rewarded by the arrival of the retreat house. . . *grace for grace.* Here during my final year of studies at Yale University in March 1989, I would once again make that hour trek in time, but an experience fit for eternity. Those precious five days following the retreat of Saint Ignatius profoundly changed me from one who desired to climb the worldly ladder of honors and power, to a faithful follower serving under the standard of Christ the King! Thanks to the prayers of my mother, the Rosary of the heavenly Queen and those Exercises of Ignatius, I eventually found myself bound for the seminary where six years later in 1996 I would be ordained a priest for eternity! What a thrill to return to the Retreat House just a week later on the Feast of the Apostles, Peter and Paul, to celebrate for faithful and friends my 1st Solemn High Mass, there where it all started.

Full circle we come, and now 23 years later with 18 years teaching the Faith to young men, the last 13 as Headmaster of our boarding school, La Salette Academy, June 2019 brought me back to the seminary, now twice removed from its Ridgefield, CT location, as assistant priest at the sacerdotal ordination of my 15th student. Some of these students now run schools themselves, including my own successor at La Salette Academy. Profoundly we must thank Our Lord, the Master of the harvest, as well as all friends and benefactors who have made and continue to make this place of faith and grace on Tackora Trail a reality. *Ad multos annos!*

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