

The Oral History of San Martín de Porres Catholic Mission

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Objective

This project documents the early history of San Martín de Porres Catholic Mission, Dayton, Oregon. The congregation is unique - it is the only catholic mission in the Pacific Northwest to provide all of its services solely in Spanish. Its central location for parishioners around the Willamette Valley allows San Martín de Porres to serve as a second home to hundreds of immigrant families. The mission is especially important as a place cultural celebration and as a community gathering place.



Photo1 Is a drawing of the exterior plan for San Martín de Porres.

Methods

Early parishioners and remaining founders of the mission were contacted for participation in in-depth interviews, about the early history of San Martín de Porres. A total of nine individuals chose to be interviewed, either at the church or at their homes. Some of the interviews were conducted in Spanish and others in English. The majority of participants worked directly with Father Frank Kennard to found the mission. The remaining individuals joined soon after the purchase of the second building and joined to become active members for decades to follow. (Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the respondents.)

Newspaper articles written by the Catholic Sentinel about San Martín de Porres were also collected as references. Lastly, the Archdiocese of Portland participated by providing a copy of records that pertained to the goal of the original project.

Results

Upon completion of the research, specific themes are used to describe the historical and cultural importance of San Martín de Porres Catholic Mission.

Early History

Early 1970s – Father Frank Kennard holds mass with Latino immigrants under a tree in the park and in the fields, because no Catholic Church in the area offered mass in Spanish.

1974 – Using his own savings, Father Frank Kennard purchases a building in Dayton, Oregon to use as a space for Latino families to practice religious ceremonies.

1978 – San Martín de Porres is used to practice religious ceremonies by families from Salem, Independence, Corvallis, Mt. Angel, Jefferson and other surrounding areas.

September 1978 – The abandoned movie theater next to San Martín is purchased and reconditioned into a church.

December 1980 – Bishop Waldschmidt dedicates and blesses the church with the name *San Martín de Porres*.

February 1983 – The first purchased building is remodeled and converted into what is today known as Kennard Hall.

Results (Cont.)

Father Frank Kennard worked along side the Latino community to create a safe and permanent place to practice religious and cultural ceremonies.

Purchase and Reconstruction of the Buildings

Father Frank Kennard purchases an old blacksmith shop with his personal savings. The building is used as a gathering place for migrant farm workers to celebrate mass in Spanish. As the congregation grows the need for a bigger place grows as well, leading to organized fundraising events when parishioners learn that the adjacent building is for sale. Once the building is purchased, parishioners begin work on the reconstruction with their own hands.



Photo 2 Parishioners attend mass in refurbished blacksmith shop.



Photo 3 Parishioners prepare traditional Mexican food for fundraiser.

“Everyone was there helping, if you were not helping with one thing you were helping with something else. Some people came from Beaverton, others from Amity, people came from everywhere. It was a lot of work but it was achieved.”

-Guadalupe



Photo 3 Parishioners installing and painting donated seats.

“We built the church with our own hands. Everyone volunteered their time after work and during the weekends to reconstruct our church. The men would work on the house and some women would prepare food to feed everyone that was working.”

-Juana



Photo5 Parishioners working on the reconstruction of the 2nd building.

Strong Sense of Community

Members of the congregation describe the mission as a place with a strong sense of community, and as a family. The community welcomes new Latinos to the area with as much support as they can provide.



Photo 6 Parishioners building community by sharing a meal.

“I felt that everyone was very close, very united. Everyone would always help each other out, with whatever anyone needed. Everyone was always involved in something, it was the united community that we still have now.”

-Trini

San Martín as place for Cultural Expression

San Martín serves as a place to celebrate the Mexican culture of the parishioners. Special celebrations such as El Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe (Celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, El Día del Divino Niño (Celebration of the Divine Child), Posadas and many more are celebrated annually to preserve the traditions.



Photo 7 Parishioners celebrating a cultural event.



Photo 8 Cultural celebration at San Martín

Save San Martín/Salva San Martín

In 2010, San Martín was faced with the possibility of closure. It was explained to the parishioners that the mission did not generate sufficient funds to maintain it active. The parishioners did not want to lose their mission; therefore they began to organize. A strong movement along with a petition to the Vatican and a generous donation allowed San Martín to maintain their doors open.



Photo 9 Parishioners wearing their “Save San Martín” shirts visiting St. Mary’s Cathedral in Portland, OR.

Conclusions

San Martín de Porres is not only a space for religious practice but it also serves as a second home to many Latinos living in the Willamette Valley. It is a place that has been built with the work of the Latino community over 30 years ago and it continues to be strong and united. The parishioners hope to celebrate cultural and religious ceremonies for years to come.

Acknowledgement and References

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