

Numerous Thresholds of Time and Tradition
Were Crossed in the Planning and Completion
of the Cloistered Building of
Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church

by Dot Porter



Roman Catholics living and visiting in the Gualala region had always attended St. Aloysius in Point Arena. As Gualala became more populated and The Sea Ranch was developed, St. Aloysius was too small to accommodate the growing Catholic congregation -- especially when summer months brought many vacationers into the area. Alternate plans were considered.

The history of Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church of Gualala began more than 25 years ago when Ida and John Bower donated the property on Church Street as the future site for a church building.

The Sea Ranch-Gualala parishioners started services in various homes and occasionally in what was then known as The Sea Ranch Stables. Fire laws changed and prevented further use of the stables for church services, and Sunday Mass was moved to the Gualala Community Center. When August came and the Gualala Arts needed the Community Center for its annual Art in the Redwoods show, the congregation decided to hold its summer Masses on the forested lot reserved for the future church. A bit of lot clearing was done, and rustic benches and an altar were constructed. On one occasion during a brief summer shower, a visiting priest remarked, "You have a beautiful cathedral here, but it leaks." Services were moved back to the Community Center for the winter months. However, plans for a permanent church were continually discussed and dreamed about.

After many years, and with the approval of the Santa Rosa Diocese, a Planning Committee, made of enthusiastic members with talents in many fields, was appointed and vigorous fund raising began. Outlines of the structure started on paper. Should it be a building of dual function -- social and sacred? Should it be traditional, possibly patterned after the Fort Ross Chapel? Or should it be a one-of-a-kind modern? Discussions eventually yielded a concrete plan: a sacred place for prayer and contemplation, and if a way could be found to provide for social functions, it would be a benefit.

James E. Burlage, FAIA, a part-time parishioner, volunteered to join the Planning Committee and design the church to the final approved concepts on a pro bono basis. David Arkin, also a part-time parishioner and a graduate architect, was appointed to assist in the detail design. With their guidance and suggestions, a space similar to the traditional cloister with outbuildings would provide for social and community needs with the church proper remaining as a sacred space. Mr. Burlage commented the unique style might be called Modern Gothic, "As in the Middle Ages, this new church evolved from the desire of a group of people to have their own structure for worship and a place which might serve other faiths. The articulated columns, the diagonal bracing to the beams and the sweeping visual movement to the altar are a gothic reference, as is the cloister surrounded with sloping roofs."

A regional domestic architecture of dramatically slanted roof lines, influenced by wind and sun angles, naturally finished materials, large clear windows incorporating tree-like forms and folding side walls which can be opened, preserve the desired intent of accentuating the serenity of the surrounding woodlands and are in keeping with the outdoor character of the summer Masses.

The roof-to-floor windows, with the inclusion of glazed panels delineating the cross, give an expansive view beyond the site to the crescent beach where the Gualala River enters the sea. As a worshiper faces the altar and looks to the right, a rustic fence surrounding four graves becomes apparent. These graves are significant in the church's development.

In the mid-1860s, Cyrus D. and Elizabeth Robinson left Pennsylvania and moved to California. Cyrus, being an entrepreneur, and Elizabeth, being a supportive wife, soon acquired land and built "Gualala House," a hospitality center for travelers along the coast. The site of that building was oceanward, just below the knoll on which Mary Star of the Sea now sits. The original Gualala House burned down, and in the 1903 Cyrus relocated his establishment southward and built what still stands as the Gualala Hotel. Cyrus' daughter

eventually sold the Gualala Hotel property to Mark Pedotti and Antonio Ciapucci. The one bit of land that was not part of the sale was a "parcel of land 200 feet square where members of the Robinson family are buried."

After Antonio died, his two sons, George and Charles, divided their father's property with George taking the hotel. George married Ida Gianoli, daughter of another pioneer family, and they managed the property. Some years later George died, and some time later his widow, Ida, married John Bower.

It was Ida and John Bower's gift of land that began the history of the parish.

In addition to those of Mary Star of the Sea congregation and their dedicated pursuit of this magnificent project, many individuals of the coastal community have contributed time, energy and money, have cleared trees, planted trees, moved rocks, painted windows and doors, built cabinets, attended meetings, organized volunteers, raised funds, provided support to a talented contractor and done a myriad of other tasks attendant to the completion of this splendid building. It is an ecumenical effort and place of worship for all.

On August 27, 1995, formal dedication ceremonies were held by The Most Reverend J. Patrick Ziemann, Bishop of Santa Rosa, and under the leadership of Father John Martin, Pastor, the church building moved from dream to reality.

Credit and gratitude for information to Joanna McLaughlin, James E. Burlage, FAIA, and Annette White Parks, author of "ghawala-li, water coming down place," 1980, FreshCut Press, Ukiah, California.







Photos courtesy of Will Wade