



Above » The historic St. George Tabernacle is shown in St. George in 2023. Top left » The St. George Tabernacle choir, circa 1880, with John Macfarlane shown in the middle of the back row. Left » This image from August 1909 shows Catholic Bishop Lawrence Scanlan.

## How can Latter-day Saints and Catholics become friends? An 1879 event points the way.

Some people who live in Utah, but do not belong to the predominant Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, feel ostracized. I've been lucky to have the opposite experience.

Despite being part of a small group here — Irish Catholics — I've known nothing but friendship from my Latter-day Saint neighbors. Perhaps that's due to good karma flowing from a wonderful but little-known interfaith act of kindness performed 145 years ago this month.

Three remarkable but different men — Erastus Snow, John Macfarlane and Lawrence Scanlan — are responsible.

In the late 1800s, Erastus Snow — originally from Vermont and among the first Mormon pioneers to enter the Salt Lake Valley — was an apostle of his church. He also was in charge of the faith's growth and operations in southern Utah and the Four Corners area.

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A fiery and eloquent speaker and defender of the faith, Snow led several church missions all over the world. He also oversaw construction of the historic and beautiful St. George Tabernacle and Temple, which opened in 1876 and 1877, respectively.

At Snow's request, John Macfarlane, a Scottish immigrant and skilled choirmaster, brought beautiful music to those two Latter-day Saint houses of worship. He also wrote what likely is the best-known Latter-day Saint Christmas hymn, "Far, Far Away on Jude's Plains."

As a musician, Macfarlane no doubt understood the phrase "living artist" all too well, and so to pay the bills and keep a roof over his family's head, he also worked as a surveyor. In 1879, that surveying job brought Macfarlane to Silver Reef, a booming mine town 20 miles northeast of St. George.

While there, Macfarlane met a fellow immigrant and churchman, an Irish-born Catholic priest named Lawrence Scanlan, who had been ministering to his flock in Utah for six years.

The priest was responsible for a small but far-flung group of Catholics in the Utah Territory, which included Nevada. Scanlan eventually would serve as first bishop of the Diocese of Salt Lake City.

In 1879, however, Scanlan was trying to build a church, a school and a hospital for miners in Silver Reef, almost 300 miles away from his home base up north. Although a devout Catholic, Scanlan was comfortable living and working among Latter-day Saints.

In a 2003 Utah Historical Quarterly article about early Catholic-Mormon relations, my friend Utah historian Gary Topping recounted one Scanlan report about his ministry:

"We sometimes visit exclusively Mormon towns, and they receive us kindly and

hospitably, offering us the use of a hall and even of their own churches, wherein to say Mass and hold other services. I visited some of those places lately, and preached night and morning to large and attentive audiences. After the services, many came to me and expressed themselves well pleased with our doctrine, asked me several questions and invited me to come again."

### A Mass for interfaith masses

Perhaps due to their common North Atlantic heritage, or maybe because of their mutual interest in ecclesiastical matters, Scanlan and Macfarlane became regular dinner companions when they both were in Silver Reef.

A friendship formed. One evening, Scanlan bemoaned how he had no church choir in Silver Reef and barely even a church. St. John's Catholic Church did not open there until later in 1879. Macfarlane made a mental note.

Macfarlane told Snow about Scanlan's plight and suggested they offer the St. George Tabernacle as a venue for Mass with musical support from Macfarlane's Latter-day Saint choir. Snow agreed to do so.

The unusual Mass was scheduled for May 25, 1879. The Intermountain Catholic has reported the Mormon choir was to sing the "Mass in D" by composer William Cumming Peters, copies of which were ordered specifically for the event.

Macfarlane's troupe practiced regularly, and even learned some Latin to sing with greater precision and accuracy. According to Topping, "Scanlan reportedly traveled repeatedly to St. George to train the choir in proper pronunciation of the Latin text."

When the big day arrived, hundreds of Catholics and Latter-day Saints packed the Tabernacle for the service. Either Snow or Macfarlane invited Scanlan to speak to the assembly during or just after the Mass. Topping called it "a remarkable ecumenical gesture."

A correspondent named "Anram" described the event in a letter published in the

Deseret News on June 2, 1879. The letter praised Scanlan as "a man of considerable information" and someone who, "considering his faith, appears to be liberal in his views."

Some 140 years later, in May 2019, Catholics and Latter-day Saints gathered again in the St. George Tabernacle to remember and celebrate the event. Scanlan's Catholic heir, Bishop Oscar Solis, attended as did Latter-day Saint Steven Snow, then the church historian, as well as the great-great-grandson of Erastus Snow.

Snow told the story of Alfredo Filippella, a Catholic organist in Italy, who had heard about the 1879 St. George Tabernacle Mass and wanted to repay the favor. In 2013, Filippella reconfigured his Catholic Sunday church duties so he also could play piano for a nearby small Latter-day Saint congregation in Battipaglia that did not have a musician.

"I owe how acts of kindness can come back," Snow said, "even 140 years later."

So do I. In fact, I've seen it firsthand. My friends, the Trappist monks from the old Huntville monastery, developed deep bonds with their Latter-day Saint neighbors. My 2021 memoir, "Monastery Mornings," about growing up at the abbey, tried to explain the palpable sadness in the Ogden Valley when the monks moved away.

"Each year with the thaw of deep winter at the monastery came the warmth of an approaching Easter. The hibernating pastures and farms of Huntville awoke and filled the three forks of the Ogden River with the icy cold runoff of the melting snowpack. More than 40 years after my first Easter at the monastery, the usually much-anticipated ritual of seasonal transformation and renewal felt differently. It was 2017, and the last time the monks and the saints would together welcome spring to the mountain valley they had shared for as long as anyone could remember."

### My Latter-day Saint friends

I am working on another book about this interfaith friendship. Among other stories, it

tells how people raised as Latter-day Saints are preserving the old monastery property and its agricultural legacy.

On their "Mormon Land" podcast, The Salt Lake Tribune's Dave Noyce and Peggy Fletcher Stack were the first journalists to interview me about "Monastery Mornings." Since then, I've spoken to almost as many Latter-day Saint book clubs as Catholic gatherings about my book and the monks.

Several of my closest colleagues at my old law firm, Jones Waldo Holtz & McDougall, were devout Latter-day Saints. One of them, LeGrand Curtis, who, like Steven Snow, went on to serve as church historian, was the first to comfort me when a beloved fellow partner died and has been a good friend ever since.

Later, I watched at the Catholic funeral for a founder of that same law firm — Don Holbrook — as his friend Thomas Monson, president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, tearfully blessed Don's body before its final journey.

Vickie Snow, my legal assistant and friend for almost four decades, came to my Catholic wedding. A few years later, I joyfully attended a send-off before one of her children went on a Latter-day Saint mission.

I took a client George Myers, another Latter-day Saint to the Notre Dame-IVU football game in Provo several years ago. We sat in the Fighting Irish section and — despite proudly wearing his Cougar jersey — George made friends with the Notre Dame fans surrounding him.

Finally, I traveled to the East Coast with yet another Latter-day Saint client, Kent Strelling, to attend a conference together. We flew on separate routes. My flight was delayed, changed and did not arrive until about 2 a.m. We had no cellphones back then to communicate or coordinate, but Kent was at the airport to pick me up anyway, with a big smile on his face.

Most of these wonderful saints probably did not know, at least until now, about the story of the 1879 St. George Tabernacle Mass. Yet, they instinctively channeled its essential meaning: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Their spiritual ancestors Erastus Snow and John Macfarlane would be proud. And so would Lawrence Scanlan.

The Utah Irish Catholic priest concluded his St. George remarks 145 years ago with these words: "I think you are wrong and you think I am wrong, but this should not prevent us from treating each other with due consideration and respect."

I wish we'd hear that message a lot more often today.

Michael Patrick O'Brien is a writer and attorney living in Salt Lake City who often represents The Salt Lake Tribune in legal matters. His book "Monastery Mornings: My Unusual Boyhood Among the Saints and Monks," about growing up with the monks at an old Trappist monastery in Huntville, was published by Paraclete Press and chosen by The League of Utah Writers as the best nonfiction book in 2022.