

1999-2

THE ACADEMY OF THE HOLY ANGELS

MEMORIES

HOLY CROSS HISTORY CONFERENCE

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

JUNE, 1999

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

**The Academy of the Holy Angels:
Memories**

"The years brought greater numbers to seek that happy blending of the older values with the lively spirit of modern youth, so characteristic of the Marianite educational philosophy." Sr. Praxeda Discon

When Sisters Mary of the Five Wounds, Mary of Calvary, and Mary of the Nativity arrived in New Orleans, May 1, 1849, their mission was to assist the Holy Cross Brothers by performing the needed domestic duties at St. Mary's Orphan Boys Asylum. This institution was located in an impoverished section of the city known as the Third District. Devoid of the simplest necessities of life, the Brothers were forced to beg food on a daily basis from city restaurants and food markets for the 75 children in their care (Marianite Centennial, 1948, p. 62).

Despite the hardships, deprivations, and difficulties that accompanied the work of the Sisters at the Asylum, Sr. Mary of the Five Wounds soon recognized another need, equally great - the care of young girls who were, in their day, the street children of the Third District.

These girls were too old to be admitted to the orphanage conducted by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, but Sister Five Wounds was sure that if these young girls, aged 12 to 18 years, were sheltered and directed, they would provide their own maintenance by sewing for private families and some of the larger business establishments. They would not be a burden on the city (Discon).

Because Sister's conviction was so strong, she was given permission for a trial period of six months. In a letter dated November 27, 1851, Reverend Basil Moreau expressed his approbation:

Most heartily, my dear daughter, do I approve of your enterprise for an industrial school for orphan girls, and I am sure that our Most Holy Father, the Pope, will also approve of it with pleasure (Annals, 1841-1941).

To this end, a generous benefactor, Madame Jourdan, rented a small frame building to house the nine original apprentices and contributed generously to their material and monetary work needs. Thus was begun the Immaculate Conception Industrial School whose objective was "the instruction and Christian education of young girls, particularly poor and destitute children" (Dillon, 1932). These orphans were taught to sew and were instructed in other domestic skills, as well as in religion and the rudiments of elementary academics.

With the passage of time, the need for the care of female orphans did not lessen. The small building which housed the original brood soon became too small for the number of young girls who needed care. Twice within a period of four years (1851 and 1855), Sister Five Wounds found it necessary to move her charges to more adequate housing facilities.

In 1855, through the untiring assistance of Doctor Mercier, Octave de Armas and other generous benefactors, a brick building was erected at the corner of Rampart and Elmira (now Gallier) Streets (Marianite Centennial, 1848-1948, p. 4). This building, which was the first to be built on the grounds of the future Academy of the Holy Angels, served as a home for orphan girls for more than thirty years. Today, that building houses the administration offices of the Marianites.

Seeing the success of the Industrial School, several of the families who had daughters of school age approached the Sisters with the request that they would establish a school to provide an academic education for their daughters. The Sisters opened a day school on the premises

where the orphanage was located. Although these two institutions were in close proximity to each other, each was separately operated. The orphan girls attended the Industrial School; the day school was the center of instruction for the daughters of the residents in the neighboring area.

From its beginning, the day school was a successful educational endeavor, a fact attested to by an article found in the Morning Star on August 1, 1891. This issue recalls that the school met "with generous patronage among the best classes of the anti-bellum days" (Discon, 1944).

With time, growth was inevitable. Soon the day school was no longer able to fulfill adequately the function for which it had been built. Therefore, in 1855, Sister Five Wounds, aided by Mother Mary of St. Alphonsus Shelan and Reverend Patrick Sheil, CSC, purchased a portion of the old Barthelmy Macarty Plantation - the section which was bounded by Love (North Rampart) Street, Congress Street, Elmira (Gallier) Street, and Good Children (St. Claude) Street. On this site a building which provided ample living quarters for approximately twenty boarders and needed classroom space was erected.

One of the roll books from this era contains educational data of interest. Ruled for a six-day school week - Monday through Saturday - the students' notes for English and French subjects enable the researcher to gain an insight into the struggles these French girls of antebellum days experienced in mastering the English language. For example, one young lady, who averaged 29% for English, showed an average of 100% for French (Annals, p. 136). Traditionally, these students spoke French, and the struggle they encountered in mastering English as a second language was very evident.

With the success of this first educational enterprise, the efforts of the Marianites to advance the cause of learning resulted in the incorporation of the community as a legal body

under Act 132 of the State of Louisiana. This Act of Incorporation, permitting corporations for literary, scientific, religious, and charitable purposes, was signed in March, 1857. The officers of the Corporation were Patrick F. Sheil, CSC, President; Sisters Mary of the Passion, Nativity, Calvary, Desert, Helen and de Chantal, Councillors (Chronicles, 1859).

By the end of the 1850's, the impending War Between The States bore heavily upon the Sisters. They began to feel the effects of the economic depression gripping the country, partly due to the lessening of the numbers of the students in the school. Their parents could not afford the tuition.

Nevertheless, the Sisters remained firm in their efforts to promote the cause of education, and in accordance with the custom established by Father Moreau, one reads in the Chronicles of 1859 that the annual distribution of premiums was conducted at the end of the scholastic year. Another account of these early exercises held at the Academy can be read in the Chronicles of the following year.

The courage to engage in the activities of the scholastic year notwithstanding, by October of 1857, the panic of war had descended upon New Orleans. The Chronicles are filled with the events of those dark days.

Louisiana seceded from the Union in 1861, and President Lincoln ordered a blockade of all Southern ports. New Orleans' lifeline was no longer operable and prices of attainable supplies were so exorbitant that only the wealthy had sufficient food.

Meanwhile, General Benjamin F. Butler, the Federal Commanding Officer, had entered the city of New Orleans where he ruled for several months. The banks were taken over by the Federals and Confederate paper money was continuously depreciated in value.

Again, desperate circumstances dictated desperate action. Sisters Alphonsus and Calvary appealed directly and personally to General Butler for aid. They simply stated their need: their house was without adequate support. They had lowered tuition to meet the resources of the students' families, and the orphans were being fed with the food for which the Sisters begged.

Butler listened to the Sisters' story and intimated that help would be forthcoming if the Sisters would declare allegiance to the Union. The Sisters resolutely refused to pay for bread through treason. Then after some minutes of hesitation, the General surprisingly and generously acceded to their request. He gave the Sisters five hundred dollars in Union money and the assurance of monthly provisions - full army rations for the Sisters and half rations for the children. This benefit he continued for three years (Catta, 1959, p. 234).

Shortly before the outbreak of the war, Mother Mary of the Holy Cross, the Provincial Superior, had submitted plans for a new Academy to the General Chapter in France. Mother had then told the Council that the Province was free of debt and could set aside a considerable sum yearly for the purpose. Having received the necessary approval, in 1862, despite the handicaps facing them, the Sisters undertook this gigantic project (Annals).

A three-story brick building with an attic which would house the Sisters and the boarders was designed. By March 19, 1862, the frame buildings on the property owned by the Marianites had been demolished, and the work of laying the foundation of the new building had begun. Despite the progress of the War, the construction of the building advanced, and on May 3, 1862, the cornerstone was laid for the Academy of the Holy Angels. The Chronicles tell us that many of the students' parents paid tuition by supplying bricks for the new building which was completed in 1865. In September of that year, the Academy opened its doors to 47 boarders who participated

in the ceremonies of the solemn blessing and dedication on October 2 (Discon, p. 7).

Progress in the academic world followed the opening of Holy Angels. On February 2, 1866, the Academy was empowered, under the State Laws of Louisiana, to grant high school diplomas as a chartered education institution (Centennial, p. 52).

Although the curriculum was academic in trend, in accordance with French cultural standards for female education, tapestry, music, and art work continued to be offered. The Academy Record for the years 1867-1872 notes the fact that extra charges, besides the twenty dollars per trimester, included monthly fees for fancy work, one dollar; artificial flowers, four dollars; music and use of the piano, four dollars (Record, p. 13). These were quite steep prices for the elite of the city who sought a well-rounded education for their daughters.

The Academy having been empowered to issue high school diplomas, the first graduation exercises were held in 1867 and continued annually, in unbroken succession, until the closing of the Academy's doors in 1992. No account of that first graduation has been preserved, but a later account from the Morning Star gives an insight into the commencement ceremonies. The annual examinations were conducted somewhat as a public seminar in the presence of at least seven distinguished members of the clergy and public officials. The graduation, which was held four days later, included distribution of premiums, dramatic presentations by the students, and addresses by two members of the clergy. The entire program lasted five hours. (Morning Star, July 30, 1869).

The 1870's were hard years for the citizens of New Orleans. Bankruptcy, floods, yellow fever and cholera epidemics, and crop failures completed the devastation the war had begun. Therefore, it was no small achievement of the Marianites to have increased the enrollment of the

Academy to 70 students by 1875. Among these young ladies, a new social attitude became noticeable. The Creole and the American now sat side by side for instruction. Additionally, the orphan girls were admitted to the Academy to receive the rudiments of education (Chronicles, p. 18). Here were the first sparks of true democracy! (Chronicles, 1875)

In 1880, at the request of Archbishop Napoleon J. Perche, the Sisters opened a day school to satisfy the insistent requests of the people. The first day scholars were welcomed into the Academy in September of that year. Although enrollment of both day scholars and boarders increased year after year, much information concerning the activities of the school and its progress has been found wanting. Nevertheless, Holy Angels did not close its doors. Classes continued, and young ladies graduated.

One finds in the Chronicles of 1885 that the Chapel of Our Lady of Seven Dolores, with a seating capacity of 500, was erected on the campus. It was from this Chapel that graduations, presided over by Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel, were celebrated until the early 1940's. At that time, the site of commencement exercises was St. Louis Cathedral.

A change in the curriculum offered at Holy Angels was noted in the Morning Star (1908). Stenography and typewriting would be offered as a regular course of studies, the beginning of sharp lines of division between the commercial and the academic curricula. This distinction continued until the mid 20th century when students were allowed to pursue business courses as electives in their pursuit of the academics.

The 1920's were years of prosperity and larger enrollments. It was during this time that a two-story brick building was added to the existing structures. A student cafeteria and music practice rooms were located on the lower floors, and the second floor housed an auditorium

(Chronicles, 1923).

In 1925, the High School Department was accredited by the Louisiana State Department of Education, a recognition that gave impetus to the number in the student body. Included in the total of 235, were 65 boarders from the surrounding states and Central and South America (Letter, May 5, 1925).

From its earliest days music had been a part of the Academy's curricular offerings. Added to the vocal and piano instruction in later years was a band (discontinued in the 1930's) and a very successful Glee Club and Chorale. To complete these fine arts offerings in the curriculum of the Academy, mention must be made of Mother Mary Xavier's contribution (Coulon, Vivian, MSC. Mother Mary Xavier: The Lady and Her Legacy). As principal of Holy Angels, she produced a number of pageants that afforded the students the opportunity to take part in dramatic presentations during a period of twenty years. The students' presentation in 1948, the centenary of the Marianites arrival in Louisiana, dramatized the life of Father Basil Moreau (Annals, p. 179). Father Joseph Buckley, SM, paid tribute to the Academy's fame for a "well-rounded Catholic and cultural education imparted to the daughters of New Orleans for 96 years." (Annals, p. 180).

With the passage of time, the curriculum of the early days of the Academy, taught in English and in French, was no longer in vogue. Spanish, as well as French, now had a prominent place in the schedule.

Art classes which included sketching, water coloring, and oil painting replaced the making of wax flowers and tapestry. Changes were also seen in the physical structure of the Academy building. While the boarders continued to be housed on the third floor, the Sisters' residential quarters on the second floor and the boarders' dining room were relocated in the newly-built St.

Joseph Convent. Now, adequate library space and science labs became a reality (Chronicles, 1936).

With the involvement of the United States in World War II, the Academy students became a viable part of the "war effort." Black-out curtains, the Victory Corps, air raid drills, victory gardens and collecting waste fats were common expressions and activities in everyone's life. Never did the Holy Angels' students hesitate in their patriotic endeavors during these trying years which culminated at the Academy with a grand "Welcome Home" to General Lawton Collins on his return to New Orleans (Chronicles, 1945).

The years of World War II had brought an intensification of academic offerings and commercial preparation to the Academy's students, and the number of those seeking entrance greatly increased. Therefore, in 1944 the primary grades were moved from Holy Angels to St. Cecelia Elementary School to allow room for expansion of the upper levels.

Just three years later the Academy was again bulging at the seams. To remedy this situation, property was purchased on St. Claude Avenue across from Holy Angels. The building which was already on the property was converted into classrooms, and when the 1947-48 school year began, the upper elementary grades were housed in new quarters. Although contacts still remained between Holy Angels and the "school across the street," the arrangement proved unsatisfactory. Crossing the busy thoroughfare that St. Claude Avenue had become posed a real danger for those who attended assemblies or patronized the Academy cafeteria at lunch time. Since it was impractical to believe that the seventh and eighth graders could return to the Holy Angels campus, the decision was made to exclude all elementary grades from the Academy.

Post World-War II years brought even greater numbers of students to seek the values and

lively spirit so characteristic of the Marianite educational philosophy (Discon, 1944). These years were very successful ones for the students also. The awards for literary, oratorical, journalistic, musical, commercial, and athletic prowess which were displayed in the trophy cases were silent witnesses to that fact.

But life never stands still. Again, the Sisters were faced with a momentous decision. The Academy could no longer accommodate the numbers of high school students who sought admittance, and the only solution seemed to be to convert Holy Angels into a day school. The boarders' third-floor dormitories would be made into classrooms. Tradition protested! Since its foundation, the school had been a resident Academy! Nevertheless, after weighing the pros and cons of the situation, the decision was reached: with the opening of the 1958 academic year, Holy Angels enrolled only day students (Sperier 1990, 18).

In the late 1940's, Mr. and Mrs. Ernest B. Norman offered the Marianites a 40-acre tract on the West Bank of the Mississippi River which "could be used for the construction of a school or other needs of the community." In 1955, construction of a new Provincial House, a novitiate and a college for the scholastics - all of which had been previously housed on the Academy campus - was begun (Annals, 191).

By the spring of 1960, the move to the new location was completed, and Sister Theresa MacDonald, the Academy principal, began the renovations that would allow the 600 applicants for the Fall semester to find place at the Academy. In addition to the reorganization of existing space, in the fall of 1962, a new gymnasium was dedicated.

Hardly were the renovations completed when Hurricane Betsy struck on September 9, 1965. The third floor of the Academy was seriously damaged and the ceiling of the Chapel

suffered extensive water damage (Chronicles, 1965). However, such tragedies had never before stopped the Marianites in their forward movement to meet the needs of the Academy; nor would Betsy.

After the recovery from her destruction, a Home Economics program was introduced. Half of the area that had been the novitiate dormitory (on the third floor of the original Industrial School) was converted into a sewing laboratory. Two years later, the remaining area was renovated into modern kitchens for teaching cooking and other food-related skills (Chronicles, 1970, 1972). Space on the first floor was transformed into the Art and Music Departments. Among all the changes, perhaps the most touching and sentimental, was the transformation of the Chapel - now too large for the Sisters' needs and spacious enough for the needed expansion - into the Academy library. The stained glass windows were kept, making it probable that Holy Angels had the only high school library boasting of German-made windows picturing sacred themes.

The decade of the seventies witnessed some major changes in the physical plant. During this time, Holy Angels was awarded two grants totaling \$150,000 from the Libby-Dufour Foundation for capital improvements. Under the able guidance of Sister Michel, the porches of the gray building were enclosed, thus giving space for project workrooms; the heating system installed at the birth of the Academy was re-invigorated; wall-to-wall carpet was laid; and new desks were bought for every classroom. Likewise, in 1976, the main Academy building was placed on the National Register of Historic Landmarks (Sperier, 1990, 19).

Another mark of recognition was given the Academy when in 1982, after an intensive three and one-half days of interviewing faculty, administration, students, and parents, observing classes and students' overall attitudes as they went from class to class, the Southern Association

of Schools and Colleges (SACS) granted its approval to Holy Angels. This was a first! After the next five years, the approbation was renewed (Chronicles, 1982, 1987).

It has been a part of the history of Holy Angels that those Marianites who have been at its helm have had to discern what was most conducive to the life of the institution - its mission and its destiny. In the mid-eighties and into the first years of the nineties, economic and sociological changes began to redefine the Academy's mission. White flight, the crash of oil production, the decrease in birthrates in the early seventies, and cutbacks at NASA and oil-related industries are but a few of the trends that greatly affected the Academy. Money was scarce and tuition was on the increase. Despite the continuing emphasis on curriculum development and the opportunity offered to the students to develop their business and technical skills in a modern computer lab, one could see the handwriting on the wall. When Sister Michel returned to Holy Angels as its principal in 1991, she met with the Provincial Council on several occasions to give them her evaluation of the life span of the Academy. With heavy hearts, the decision was made to end the mission of education that this proud institution had enjoyed for more than 136 years. In May of 1992, after a beautiful Mass of Thanksgiving in the gym and a day of socializing on campus for the hundreds of alumnae, the Academy closed its doors with dignity.

And what of this dignified structure that still stands proud and tall? It will continue to shelter and nourish those in need as it did in its long-ago beginning when it was the Immaculate Conception Orphanage and Industrial School. This time, however, it will shelter the elderly who, in many cases, are in need of the same care that the "street children of the Third District" were given by those pioneer Marianites.

Sources

- Catta, Canon Etienne and Catta, Tony. (1944). Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors. (Edward L. Heston, CSC, Trans.). Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press.
- Coulon, Sister Vivian, MSC. (1989). Mother Mary Xavier: The Lady and Her Legacy. Unpublished manuscript.
- Dillon, Catherine. Chronicles: Marianites of Holy Cross. Mimeographed manuscript.
- Discon, Sister Mary Praxeda, MSC. (1944). History of the Marianites in Louisiana. Unpublished manuscript.
- Haggerty, Sister Mary Loyola, MSC. (1948). Marianite Centennial in Louisiana: 1848-1948. New Orleans: Hope Haven Press.
- LeMans. (1947). Annals of the Congregation of the Marianites of Holy Cross, 1841-1946.
- LeMans. (1991). Annals of the Congregation of the Marianites of Holy Cross, 1940-1991.
- Marianites of Holy Cross. (1859). Chronicles of the Marianites of Holy Cross. Privately printed.
- Moreau, Father Basil. (1933). Common Rules of the Marianites of Holy Cross. Tours: Maison Mame.
- Record Book, Academy of the Holy Angels. (1872).
- Sperier, Sister Mary Joel, MSC. (1990). The Academy: Heart and Home. Unpublished manuscript.
- (1891, August 1). The Morning Star.
- (1925, May 5). Letter of Certification.