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THE MARIANITES FIRST MOVE FROM NEW ORLEANS – PLAQUEMINE, LA

By

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"Ask a small Plaquemine girl wearing saddle oxfords, a blue skirt and a white blouse where she goes to school, and she will answer, "The Convent."

Most Plaquemine residents use this term to refer to the Academy of St. Basil, seldom realizing that the main building of "the Convent" dates back to the 1850s, and that it was once used as Federal headquarters by invading Union soldiers during the Civil War. (Chronicles of St. Basil Academy)

On May 21, 1857, Rev. Patrick Shiel, C.S.C., representing the Marianites of Holy Cross, signed a contract with Rev. Charles Chambost, Pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church, engaging the Sisters to establish a school for girls and to teach in the College, a high school for boys, which had been begun in 1853 by the Pastor. These were the first Marianite missions outside New Orleans.

The girls' school, the future St. Basil Academy, was opened by six Marianites on September 1, 1857 in a small rented, frame house of six rooms that also served as the Sisters' convent. Whether or not any of the Sisters went to the Boy's College is not recorded.

When the church and the adjacent boys' college were destroyed by fire in 1858, Mass was celebrated in a makeshift, totally inadequate chapel in the Sisters' house. Subsequent locations for the celebration of the Eucharist were the courthouse and, in turn, a private residence. Broken and crushed by the hardships he experienced during this time, Father Chambost returned to France. Consequently, from August to October, the Sisters and the parishioners were without the ministry of a priest.

In November 1858, a new, zealous pastor, Rev. Francis Follot was appointed to St. John the Evangelist Parish. Quickly, this good man realized the Sisters' need of money to support themselves during the summer months. Tuition would not suffice, nor would payment in kind – chickens, vegetables, etc., from the people's gardens. He, therefore, earmarked the revenue realized from the annual Spring Exhibition, held to reward the students' scholastic accomplishments, for the Sisters' summer expenses. Even this had to be carefully budgeted. This practice grew into "the Sisters' Fair" – an event which continued until the mid-twentieth century.

After two years, the people of Plaquemine realized the Sisters were overcrowded in their small house, and they should have a home of their own, more in keeping with their vocation in life. Two Catholic gentlemen, Michael Schlatre and Michael Hebert, who in the past had worked diligently in the service of the Church, purchased a property of five lots from Dr. Edward Scratchley for \$7,500 and gave it to the Sisters. Included in the purchase were several small buildings and the Doctor's private residence, a two-and-a-half story antebellum structure. He and his wife had moved to Baronne Street in New Orleans. This southern home became a convent for the sisters and the Academy of St. Basil, which was privileged to bear the name of Father Basil Moreau.

In exchange for their gift, Messrs. Schlatre and Hebert asked the Sisters to have a weekly Mass, said forever for the living and dead members of their families. Father Sheil, C.S.C., and the two donors signed a written document to this end. Later, in consideration of the great difficulty this request imposed upon the Sisters, the request was changed to read: "The Sisters will have a yearly Mass celebrated on the 10th and 15th of August (or as near as possible to those dates) – one for each of the

donors' families. Furthermore, the Sisters will receive Holy Communion twice for our intentions." (*Sunday Advocate*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, April 17, 1966)

Although the Academy prospered, it did not immediately grow into the full twelve grades. With the beginning of the Civil War, Plaquemine fell into the hands of the Federals. The chronicles of St. Basil Convent attest to the arrival of a regiment of Federal soldiers under the command of General Nathaniel Banks in April 1862. Fearing for the safety of the Plaquemine Marianites, the Provincial Superior recalled them to New Orleans, and St. Basil Academy was closed. The Sisters' property was promptly seized and used as a Federal headquarters until the close of the War.

In a letter written by Father Follot to the Sisters in New Orleans, one finds the following message: "The Convent has been looted by the soldiers, and some horses are being kept on the ground floor." It was only by virtue of this priest's intercession with General Banks that the building was not used as a military hospital, and that the Chapel was saved from being destroyed. In a second letter to the Sisters, Father writes: "Only the Sisters' Chapel was spared. Although a hinge on the tabernacle was bent out of shape, no altar ornaments – bell, crucifix, candlesticks, etc. – have been taken out of the Convent." (Marianite Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana)

At the end of the War, notwithstanding the fact that Plaquemine was a land where ruins were widespread, the Marianites returned to St. Basil on September 5, 1965. Grateful that they were able to return to Plaquemine and that the chapel had been spared, Sister Bernard, the Superior, led the returned exiles into the chapel where they sang the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving for the protection of Divine Providence. (Chronicles of St. Basil Academy, 1862-1976)

It was then, with a truly heroic spirit that Sister Bernard and the faithful corps of Sisters with her carried on the clean-up labors to make their convent a livable place again. Concurrently, they renewed the work of education at St. Basil. The success of their endeavors was proven when, within one year after its reopening, the Academy was chartered and empowered by the State of Louisiana to grant diplomas. The official document, written and signed by the state officials, is dated February 2, 1866. Sister Bernard, a veteran in the field of education, had again led the Sisters to success, this time in the classroom. In fact, in the prospectus of 1866, one reads the beginning of St. Basil's continuing and future educational system.

Subsequently, the Academy enjoyed a new lease on life for seven years and the school progressed rapidly until October 7, 1873, when a fire – its origin unknown – almost brought its end. The fire spread quickly among the buildings and trees in the convent yard, and, fed by a strong wind blowing off the Mississippi River, the flames threatened to destroy the Convent itself. Efforts of a great number of volunteer fire fighters to contain the fire were in vain.

It was at this critical moment that the Superior rushed into the community room, took the statue of the Blessed Mother holding the Infant in her arms, raised the statue to face the fire and said, "My Blessed Mother, you are our only protection!" Instantly the wind changed its course and the Convent was saved. Several days following the fire, the Archbishop visited the Convent, blessed the statue, and declared the Blessed Mother's intercession to be nothing less than truly miraculous. He commended the Sisters for their great faith and confidence in Mary, and told them never to forget the special protection she had obtained in their behalf. (Chronicles, St. Basil Academy, 1862-1976)

Although the Sisters' educational programs were meeting success at St. Basil, the Sisters were greatly concerned about the lack of education of the African-American children in Plaquemine. The pastor, Rev. M. R. Harnais, echoed this concern. Therefore, in 1881, he announced that a day school would be opened for Negro children under the direction of a Marianite Sister. (Chronicles of St. Basil Academy, 1862-1976) But during the 1880s, the missionary zeal of the Sisters conflicted sadly with Southern ideas on the education of the Negro race. Prejudices ran high; hence, the opening of St. Augustin Colored School was delayed until January 1882. This school existed until 1936. (Marianite Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana)

When the Josephite Fathers established a mission in Plaquemine in that year, the priests discovered the foundation for their parochial work had been well-laid by the Sisters who had staffed St. Augustin School during the previous fifty-three years. Perhaps the most worthy of note was Sister Gertrude, who alone spent twenty-five years bringing a Catholic education to the town's African-American children, with the help of one or two young women. In the newly established Josephite parish, a church and a new school were built, and there the Marianites continued their work of education with Sister Colman Sheehy and Sister Albeus (Hannah O'Brien) at the helm.

Marianites were also busy with the Catholic education of the public school children who attended catechism classes at St. Basil and St. John after regular class hours, and on Saturdays. Several Sisters traveled some twenty miles with the Pastor to two bayou missions attached to St. John Parish.

Earlier mention was made of the fire that destroyed the church and the Boy's School in the late 1850s. In spite of this great loss, Father Harnais's zeal and desire for the boys' education was not satiated. In 1882 he opened St. John's Free School for Boys in the rectory, and in 1889 the new St. John's Free School was ready for occupancy. This building was a total loss when it was destroyed by fire in 1906.

A temporary building was used until a more substantial two-story brick structure was completed. Then, in 1910 the present St. John's Boys School was built under the patronage of the zealous and foresighted Rev. Gerard Bosch. When the school year started in September, four Marianites took up their ministry of educating elementary school boys. (Marianite Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana)

Separate educational facilities for boys and girls had always been the norm under the Marianites who worked in Plaquemine. However, a new phase in Catholic education was inaugurated in the town when Rev. Leonard Robin was made pastor in 1933. He saw that St. Basil had long outgrown its capacity to meet the rapid development of the girls' school. Therefore, in September he introduced co-education by merging St. John Elementary School with St. Basil. This gave space at St. John for a completely coeducational high school. Boys who formerly had to travel to Baton Rouge to attend Catholic High School, or who stayed in Plaquemine and attended public high school, could now choose to continue their secondary education under the auspices of the Marianites. To accommodate this change, high school boys and girls attended St. John, while all elementary students were at St. Basil.

This arrangement lasted for a few short years. Then in 1939, Father Robin bought a building near the other educational facilities – the former D. Ephraim and Sons Dry Goods and Shoe Store. The building was remodeled, painted, and divided

into four classrooms and a library. Here, the graduates of 1940 and the following classes found their new environs for eight years.

Now space was released at St. John for the middle grades, and at the same time for the burgeoning primary level that remained at St. Basil. The first graduates of St. John High School received their diplomas in 1938. If anyone hoped to receive a St. Basil Academy diploma from that day on, that individual was doomed to disappointment. St. John High School had come into its own. From the very beginning, the school gained recognition for its high scholastic standards. Nor were extracurricular activities neglected. A band was organized, the *St. John Eagle* was published bi-monthly, the Catholic Organizations for boys and girls, and athletics and social activities became important in the lives of the students.

In 1938, October 17-20 witnessed a great manifestation of faith among the Louisiana Catholic population – the National Eucharistic Congress, which was held in New Orleans. Besides the Sisters and the other town folks from Plaquemine who took an active part in this great event of faith, the girls of St. Basil Academy band joined with the members of the Academy of Holy Angels in New Orleans to create a marching unit on Youth Day. In addition to the fifteen block march through the city all of the invited school bands assembled in the outdoor stadium at City Park, crowded with several hundred thousand participants holding lighted candles, to play for the final Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. What a thrill for those St. Basil band members who were in that group! (Personal recollection of the writer)

The measure of the Sisters' influence on the lives of their students was told when, by the late 1940s, Plaquemine could boast of at least fifteen vocations to the Marianites and of several young men at St. Ben's Seminary. How proud the Sisters

were when Thomas Allain, the first of the group, was ordained and returned to Plaquemine to celebrate his first Mass.

To mention the names of all the Sisters who taught in Plaquemine is impossible. They would fill a good portion of the time allotted to this paper; but worthy of note is Sister Victorine O'Sullivan, who was a faculty member from 1922-1929 and who returned in 1934 to be superior and principal until 1955. It was she to whom the high school students referred when they said, "Vic is roping them in" when they heard that four seniors were going to the Novitiate.

St. John's continual growth demanded more and more space for its classes at all levels. Therefore, in 1949 the high school division vacated the Ephraim building and moved to the newly-added third floor at what had been the elementary building. With all the back-and-forth movement that had characterized the St. Basil-St. John Student body, one is prompted to ask, "Can a school continue to exist and maintain itself when band-aid treatment is constantly used to satisfy immediate needs?" Whatever the reply one would make, an important answer came in 1950 when the Marianites realized that maintenance of their property had become a responsibility far beyond their means. Therefore, the Marianites sold the entire Scratchley property to St. John the Evangelist Church Parish. (Marianite Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana)

It was ten years later (1960) that the St. John high school division was again relocated, this time to a new permanent school plant some fifteen blocks west of St. Basil. Since the new facility provided living quarters for the Sister-faculty members, they moved from St. Basil, and "the Convent" was renovated to meet the needs of the remaining elementary school faculty. As the high school increased in numbers, the

Sisters' living space was converted into classrooms, and in 1966 the Sisters returned to St. Basil Convent.

It was also during 1960 that the Feast Day of Our Lady of Sorrows during Holy Week was truly a day of tears for the Sisters and the students of St. Basil – in fact, for the entire town and Marianite Community. On that day (April 8) Sister Candida died suddenly of a massive heart attack while teaching her sixth grade. After being anointed by Rev. Donald Songy, her body was taken to New Orleans for the wake and burial. What a shocking and tearful event this was for Sister's class who dearly loved their teacher.

When the Sisters who taught in high school returned to St. Basil Convent, the question became, "How are we to get to school, fifteen blocks away from the convent?" The answer came on January 23, 1967 when a group of benefactors presented them with a Volkswagen bus – not a new one, mind you! But the Sisters were delighted. They had their own means of transportation. They wouldn't have to depend upon the good will and generosity of the parents of their students.

This arrangement of high school and convent lasted for eight years while the Sisters taught in three separate locations – St. Basil, St. John Elementary, and St. John High School. In 1975, the entire education facility, including a kindergarten, moved into a newly build, expanded St. John School complex connected to St. John High School. Now there was ample classroom space for everyone. Gradually, however, the number of Sisters in Plaquemine had decreased until only three of the former seventeen remained. These three Marianites who had lived and taught at St. Basil and/or St. John remained in residence at the "Convent," but with the end of the school year on May 26, 1976, they felt their work in Plaquemine was done. Holy Cross had

been founded to meet the challenges of the time, and as the needs of the Church became more varied, the Sisters changed their apostolates to meet newly felt needs: parish ministry, nursing, religious education, social work, etc. The three Sisters – Doris Steppe, Annette Baxley, and Joel Miller – saw to the disposition of the Convent furnishings, and on June 6, 1976, St. Basil Convent was closed, thus ending the Marianites' occupancy and their education of the Plaquemine children during 119 years (Letter written by Sr. Annette Baxley)

Today, after twenty-seven years' absence of the Sisters, their influence is still very tangible. At St. John, the lay faculty who had had constant input into the philosophy, curriculum, discipline, etc., under which Marianite education takes place, had been well prepared – through leadership training by the Sisters – to continue the type of education and administration that had always characterized the Marianite school. That training has been continued today for new faculty members by the veteran teachers, the lay persons who constitute the faculty and administration, and the school continues to grow! In fact, in 2003 a new building which houses an administration wing, a technology center, and four additional classrooms for the elementary level has been added (On-site visitation by this writer)

St. Basil, on the other hand, has had a much more colorful future. The property and the several additions to the Scratchly House – additions that could be removed without harm to the main building – were bought from St. John Church Parish in July 1981 by Robert E. Smith and William H. Bond, entrepreneurs who dreamed of converting the Convent into a restaurant and guest house. Their final plans never materialized, even though they named a small classroom-turned-social-room Sister Mechtilde's Room. After declaring bankruptcy in 1985, St. Basil was

again left vacant, its windows and doors boarded against vagrants (*Iberville South*, Plaquemine, Louisiana 1981-1985). The buildings that had been built to accommodate needed classroom and cafeteria space in past years now were also boarded up to prevent vandalism. The following five years of non-use left the buildings in a sad state of disrepair, to say the least (*Iberville South*, Plaquemine, Louisiana, 1981-1985).

Nevertheless, in March 1990, the entire property was sold to Louisiana's Ex-Lieutenant Governor, Robert Freeman and his wife Marianne. Robert, who had been a little boy at St. Basil and a graduate of St. John, told this writer that he just couldn't bear to see St. Basil fall into ruin. Therefore, after removing or demolishing the added-on buildings, the Freemans restored the original Scratchley Mansion, the former St. Basil Academy, for use as their personal residence. They have had many Sisters as guests who reminisced and told stories that delighted the Freemans. Marianne's memory, however, is of Bobby's telling her he would like to buy St. Basil. "I cried," she said. "I could see the blue sky through the roof. Besides I liked the house we lived in. But three years of sweat and tears have paid off. We really love this house and it loves us in return."

Of course, the chapel is no longer a part of the house. In its space is the Freeman's daughter's room. The Sisters' Community Room has been turned into the master bedroom, and the third floor dormitory – formerly called "Paradise" by the Sisters – now has two bedrooms for the Freeman boys when they visit their parents, and a sewing room for Marianne. The only true differences on the first floor are the modern kitchen and its companion dining room with its banquet-size table. Bobby told some Sisters, "The table is a promise I made myself when I was growing up. We

were poor! My mother, my brother, and I ate on a card table in the kitchen." There has been no cutting through walls "because that would change St. Basil," the Freemans told a group of Sisters who visited them. "In fact, we had the old claw-footed bathtubs and the lavabos re-enameled to keep as much of the Convent as possible."

Presently, the high cement-covered brick wall, topped by ornate fleur-de-lis ironwork, still fronts the property. A newly constructed gateway is spanned by the original iron grillwork that proclaims "Academy of St. Basil." It welcomes all who visit or who merely pass by this memory-filled, former Marianite domicile which is now a National Historic Site, a place that older generations of former students are proud to memorialize for their children as the "convent" where they attended school.

Sources

1. Chronicles of St. Basil Academy, 1862-1976.
2. Marianite Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana.
3. *Iberville South*, Plaquemine, Louisiana, July 1981-1985.
4. *Sunday Advocate*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, April 17, 1966.
5. Personal conversations with Mr. and Mrs. Robert Freeman
6. Writer's visit to St. John School complex.