

THE EARLY HISTORY OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN OUR LADY OF LOURDES PARISH

As we prepare to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the continuous operation of Our Lady of Lourdes School, it might be worthwhile to review the history that led up to this event.

The earliest known existence of a school in Our Lady of Lourdes Parish was in January 1891, less than six months after the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes was created in Slidell. Approximately 21 children were enrolled in the first year of operation. The school was under the direction of Mrs. E. Gill. She operated the school with the approval of Father Eusebius Lavaquery, the pastor of Notre Dame du lac (Our Lady of the Lake) in Mandeville. At that time Our Lady of Lourdes was a mission of this Mandeville church. This early school closed after only one month because “the teacher could scarcely make expenses”.

After a couple of months of inactivity, another attempt to create a Catholic school in this parish was made. The biggest obstacles to success continued to be finances and available teachers. In late April 1891, a new school began under the name of St. Aloysius School.

Church records do not comment on the existence of a school until 1902. There were 35 students enrolled in the school -- 18 boys and 17 girls. The pastor of the first school was Father Placidus Dobyns, O.S.B. The school continued in its existence until 1907 when a fire forced the school to suspend instruction. All previous church records were destroyed by a fire that destroyed St. Joseph's Abbey in Covington in 1907.

In 1909 the parish reopened a school with 26 students. Year by year more and more families sent their children to be educated in the new parish school. From all indications there was usually only one teacher employed at the school at any one time. Enrollment reached an all time high in 1919 when there were 84 students. Unfortunately, it appears that the school ceased operation in 1920.

Other unsuccessful attempts were made to resurrect Catholic education during the early 1920's, but none of them existed for very long. It would not be until 1929 that a school would be built and continued in operation on a yearly basis.

THE HISTORY OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES SCHOOL 1929-2004

Numerous attempts to provide continuous catholic education to the children of Slidell failed repeatedly in the early years of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish. However, in October 1927 Father Gallus Anderau, pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Church, reported in correspondence to his colleagues that Father Benedict's “main object was to try to get a parochial school” for Slidell. Father Benedict was one of the first rectors of Our Lady of Lourdes Church. The greatest obstacles to reaching this goal was “a scarcity of available good teaching sisters and the raising of funds”. His vision was “to have the school and convent brick building ready in a year's time, possibly beginning with 6 grades (add the other two later), three sisters teaching, and possibly a fourth one ...”

In retrospect, Father Anderau was very much a visionary. He saw a bright future for the small railroad town of Slidell. He was impressed with the infrastructure of the community and the spirit of the people living here. With the prospects of a Lake Pontchartrain bridge being completed by 1928, Father Anderau foresaw that "Slidell before long will be a suburb of New Orleans".

In slightly less than two years, Father Anderau's dream was realized. A new two story building was erected on the section of land bounded by First St., Second St. and Bouscaren Ave. It contained 4 class rooms on the second floor, and a cafeteria and auditorium on the first floor. This new school was dedicated on September 13, 1929 (just six weeks prior to the great stock market crash of 1929). Contrary to the way it looks today, the front of city hall was once the rear of the school building. This first permanent school actually faced First St. In 1960, this building was sold to the City of Slidell. This building now serves as Slidell's City Hall.

The new building served the religious education needs of Slidell until it was fully staffed for the first time in 1932. The Benedictine sisters of St. Leo, Florida became the first permanent teachers of Our Lady of Lourdes School. A convent building was built next to the school to house this Benedictine community.

In 1951 the Benedictine sisters from Florida were replaced by Benedictine sisters from Covington. This new order of religious remained in the school for 15 years. In 1979 the Teresian order of sisters sent several sisters to teach in the school. Over the years, that number has dwindled to just one person, Sr. Dolores Espinosa, STJ. As is the case with many catholic schools, the decrease in the number of people in the religious life caused a sharp decline in the number of religious who served as teachers. Therefore, almost all teachers are now lay teachers who serve the church with their teaching ministry.

In 1960 Our Lady of Lourdes School was moved from the center of Slidell to the south side of town. Father Timothy Pugh, O.S.B. was responsible for erecting the new parish complex of the school buildings, cafeteria, convent and church on a 22 acre site in the new Westchester subdivision. The archdiocese moved the parish complex in order to create a new parish, St. Margaret Mary, in 1965 on the north side of the city. Father Tim, as he was known to many, later became the founding pastor of that parish.

When the school was moved to Westchester Place, it included one year of high school. The plan was to develop the school as an elementary school and a high school with one grade at a time to be added to the high school. This plan was later abandoned because of a conflict with state regulations.

The gymnasium was dedicated in April 1984 by Father Howard Hotard. He served as pastor of the parish for 32 years. The gym was originally constructed as an open air pavilion. Three exterior walls and a conference room were added in 1984. The room eventually became the school's computer lab. A separate middle school building was completed in December 1996 to house sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students.

For many years the school was a kindergarten through eighth grade school. However, in 1989 a pre-kindergarten program was added to serve the needs of four year olds in the parish. This program later expanded to two sections as the demand for early childhood education increased.

The school enjoyed many prosperous years in the 1960's and 70's. Enrollment reached an all time peak of 719 in 1962. However, the decline in the oil industry in the 1980's caused a decline in enrollment to approximately 400 students. A steady increase in enrollment began in the late 1990's and continues to this day. In 2003 the enrollment stands at 603 students with most grades having two sections of classes and two grades have three sections.

Over the years the school has added programs and technological tools such as: Extended care for students before and after school, many extracurricular activities (i.e dance team, technology club, yearbook staff, etc.) Our Lady of Lourdes was the first elementary school in the archdiocese to have its own website. It was among the first Catholic schools in the New Orleans area to have a Weatherlink weather station on campus. OLL was also partnered with the Stennis Space Center and NASA to have a GLOBE weather station at the school. It was the only school in the New Orleans area with such a system.

Thanks to the support of pastors like Father Adrian Hall, ongoing parish support, the generous contributions of our families and very active parent clubs, our school has grown to be recognized as a leader in quality education in Slidell. In fact, Our Lady of Lourdes could be considered as a "cornerstone of education in Slidell".