

History of St. Francis de Sales Church



Founding

In the mid-1800s, Catholic families moving to new homes in East Walnut Hills from Over-the-Rhine needed a parish to call their own. They had to walk to St. Philomena's, St. Paul's or to All Saints Church to attend Mass and receive the sacraments. For a brief period some Catholics in the neighborhood attended services in the chapel of the "Mission," the country house of the Jesuit Fathers of St. Xavier College on Ingleside Avenue.

But in 1849 three laymen – Francis Fortman, Joseph Kleine and H. Westjohn --recognized the growing spiritual needs of East Walnut Hills Catholics and started establishing a new parish dedicated to St. Francis De Sales. The new parish began modestly, worshipping in Francis Fortman's barn on what is now East McMillan Street opposite Hackberry Street.

A New Church

In 1850, Francis Fortman donated an empty lot on the southwest corner of Taft Road and Hackberry Street. Work then began on a more suitable place of worship for the young congregation – a church made of blue limestone. Bishop John B. Purcell laid the cornerstone for the new church on Sunday afternoon, May 12, 1850. Rev. W. Unterhincr, O.F.M., one of the most forceful orators of that time, gave the sermon.

Also attending were Rev. Stephen T. Badin, said to be the first priest ordained in the United States; the Rev. Frederick Wood, who later became Archbishop of Philadelphia; and the Very Rev. Joseph Ferneding, Vicar General. The ceremony ended at sundown with an episcopal Benediction.

The new church was dedicated by Vicar General Ferneding on Sunday Nov. 3, 1850. Archbishop Purcell was among the dignitaries attending. After the blessing, Rev. Stephen Badin, assisted by Jesuit Fathers Meyer and Boudreaux, sang solemn high Mass, Coram Archiepiscopo. Rev. M.S. Herzog acted as master of ceremonies. Vicar General Ferneding and Rev. Joseph Wood preached the sermon. The parish did not have any debt from construction of the church and had begun building its first schoolhouse.

Parish Growth 1850-1877

Rev. Michael Herzog in October 1850 became the congregation's first resident pastor. Ordained on April 15, 1849, he had been stationed at Zanesville, Ohio for one year. He served at St. Francis for two years and later returned to Switzerland.

Rev. John N. Schmid was made pastor in July 1852 and remained in charge until his death on May 15, 1860. A series of priests took turns attending to the spiritual needs of the congregation. Rev. J.J. Menge was eventually appointed pastor, and it was under his supervision that the parish began its own cemetery, Calvary Cemetery on Duck Creek Road in Evanston.

After Father Menge was transferred in July 1873, the Rev. Augustine Fisher was made pastor and the Rev. Herman Burwinkle was named assistant. The congregation soon outgrew its first church, so in 1876 the parish bought land at the current site on the corner of Woodburn Avenue and Madison Road. The cornerstone for the present school on Madison Road was laid on June 17, 1877, and by December 2, the parish dedicated its new school building. Once it was furnished, the pastor and parishioners directed their full attention to building a bigger church.



A Larger Church

Father Fisher chose architect Francis George Himpler of Hoboken, N.J. Gothic churches were his specialty. His works include churches in St. Louis and Detroit. Himpler designed St. Francis De Sales church in the middle German and French Gothic style. He used gray hill limestone, broken ashlar and Ohio free stone for buttress facings and weathering, window trim and doorways, steps and pinnacles. Exterior dimensions are 87 by 192 feet. The height of the center nave is 61 feet; the flankings are each 41 feet high. Rows of clustered columns of Georgia yellow pine flank the central nave and support groined arches of pointed Gothic on their ornately foliated capitals. The church may be the finest Gothic church in the city.

The cornerstone was laid June 30, 1878; the dedication service was held on Dec. 21, 1879. The church, including altars and organ, cost about \$200,000 to complete. The pastor's residence, now called the parish family residence, was built with the church, using the same style and materials. Almost a century later, in 1973, the church and the school were placed on the National Register of Historic Buildings.

Easing Debt, 1879-1892

After the church was built, Father Fisher requested a change and was transferred to Springfield. The Rev. Carl Schmidt became pastor in

September 1879. The young and talented priest made heroic efforts – in spite of poor health -- to reduce the parish debt and tend to the spiritual needs of the parish. He died young on Dec. 14, 1883.

The next pastor, Rev. Augustine M. Quatman resolved to reduce and eventually rid the parish of its heavy debt. In 1884, the parish's bonded indebtedness was \$75,225. Under Father Quatman's direction, the congregation held a Grand Bazaar. In 1890, another one, called a Colombian Bazaar, drew such notables as Ohio Gov. Campbell. It was held at the Odean on Woodburn Avenue between E. McMillan Street and Locust Streets; in two weeks, the parish cleared \$17,000. Again in 1892, a Ladies Bazaar at the Walnut Hills Odean brought in \$8,000. Thus was the debt gradually reduced.



The Story of "Big Joe"

St. Francis De Sales' enormous bell weighs 35,000 pounds. The clapper alone weighs 640 pounds. It was cast on Oct. 30, 1895 in Cincinnati by the E. W. Van Duzen Company, a foundry at Second Street and Broadway. It took 14 horses to haul the massive bell up Gilbert Avenue to the church. It measures 7 feet from rim to crown, and at its base, 9 feet in diameter. It is the largest church bell in the United States and the largest swinging bell ever cast in this country. (The Millennium Peace Bell in Newport, Ky. weighs 33 tons, measures 12 feet by 12 feet and was cast in France.)

The bell got its nickname "Big Joe" from Joseph T. Buddeke, a parishioner who was the largest donor to the project. It cost between \$12,000 and \$15,000 (equivalent to more than \$600,000 today). It was intended to replicate a bell named "Big Ben" in London, which never swung.

"Big Joe" occupies the entire main floor of the church's 230-foot high stone steeple. It was rung for the first time in early January 1896. Witnesses said its E-flat peal could be heard throughout a 15-mile radius. It rattled nearby buildings and shattered windows in the neighborhood.

Historian Alvin Harlow wrote in *The Serene Cincinnatians*: "It was installed, it swung, and all of Walnut Hills nearly jumped out of its collective skin. The earth trembled, windows nearby broke from the concussion, and tiny bits of cement were seen falling from between the stones of the church tower."

It is said after just one ringing, the parish decided that Big Joe must never swing again, so the bell was immobilized. For more than a century now, a foot hammer has struck the edge of the bell: At 6 a.m., 12 noon

and 6 p.m., Big Joe rings for Angelus, followed by the Westminster chimes rung by four smaller tower bells mounted a floor above.

Growth 1887 –1925

The church's exquisite main altar was consecrated by Archbishop W. H. Elder on April 27, 1887. A gift of Joseph and Agnes Kleine, it was sculpted by Cincinnati's Fred and Henry Schroeder from designs of A. Kloster of New York. The altar of pure white Rutland marble and the white marble floor cost \$20,000. The altar's onyx pillars and delicate Gothic spires are flanked by statues of St. Joseph and St. Agnes in honor of the donor's patron saints.

Father Quatman served the people of St. Francis De Sales for almost a quarter century. He passed away on March 10, 1909, and was succeeded by the much-loved and esteemed Rev. Francis M. Lamping.

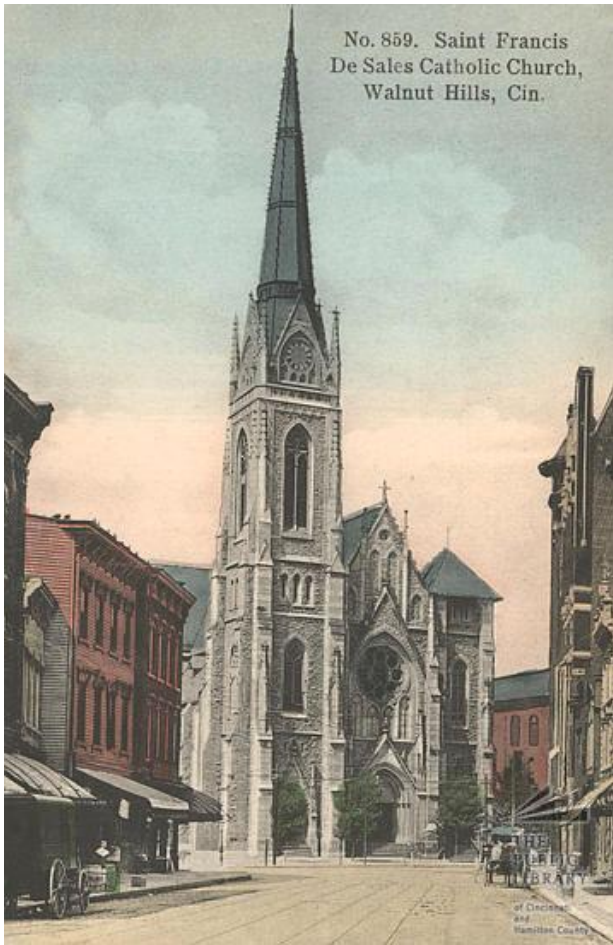
Father Lamping recognized the school building needed repair and more space for the children. Six rooms were added to the original building. A clock and chimes were added to the 230-foot church tower and debuted on Easter Sunday 1911. The Howard Clock Company of Boston produced the ensemble for \$4,200. Side altars of Italian marble also were installed in 1911. The Droppelman family donated the Sacred Heart altar on the left, and the Married Ladies Sodality and Young Ladies Sodality donated the Blessed Virgin altar on the left.

Rev. Lamping also arranged for an enlargement of the priest's house. Although loans were scarce during World War I, one bank granted the parish a loan, and made possible the new additions. Father Lamping was renowned as an eloquent orator and preacher.

Archbishop Moeller appointed the Rev. J. Henry Schengber to succeed Father Lamping. Father Schengber said his first Mass at St. Francis De Sales on Sept. 8, 1921, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He reduced the parish debt from \$38,000 to zero within three years. In 1924, the parish installed new stained glass windows crafted by a Munich art company at a cost of \$12,000. One donor, Rose Palm, gave money, which her husband Max wanted her to use to buy a fur coat, toward a stained-glass window, the second on the left as you enter the main doors. She wanted to give a lasting gift to the parish in honor of her parents. After she died in 1929, Max, a Lutheran, visited the church for the first time and read the inscription on the window: "Presented by Mr. and Mrs. Max Palm in memory of Mr. and Mrs. John Bast."

The parish celebrated its Diamond jubilee on Nov. 15, 1925. The Most Reverend Archbishop John T.

McNicholas, O.P., S.T.M., celebrated a Pontifical High Mass and administered the Sacrament of Confirmation in the afternoon. Rt. Reverend Monsignor Louis J. Nau, rector of Mt. St. Mary Seminary, preached the sermon.



De Sales Corner Expansion

In 1924, at the suggestion of Archbishop Henry Moeller, the parish acquired the Roger, Homan and Enneking properties on Hackberry Street at a cost of \$90,000. The school was old and crowded, and the parish wanted to build a new one. Plans were drawn up for a high school to occupy the current site of Walnut Hills High School. However, in 1928, Archbishop McNicholas instead decided to build a high school on St. Francis De Sales newly acquired property – to the distress of Father Schengber and the parish. The present Purcell Marian High School building was constructed in 1928 on Hackberry Street for \$600,000. The site was big enough for the building, parking space for worshippers and a playground for the children. And even with Purcell, the site had enough room for a new grade school.

Purcell High School opened its doors to 450 boys for the school year 1928-1929. Rev. John A. Elbert was the first principal. Brothers of the Society of Mary and priests of the neighboring parishes composed the teaching staff.

On Oct. 4, 1929, the new boulevard connecting De Sales Corner with Victory Parkway was dedicated. St. Francis De Sales schoolchildren marched in the parade, and Rev. J.S. Grimmelman and Joseph T. Dilhoff represented the parish.

In September 1931, Archbishop McNicholas established the Latin School at De Sales. It occupied the attic of the parish school for more than 20 years. Many of its graduates distinguished themselves in the professions, the priesthood or brotherhood. The Latin school gave talented boys an opportunity to advance more rapidly in their education, train for the professions or prepare for leadership in the Church.

In that same year of 1931, the school playground was leveled and surfaced with gravel. A generous parishioner donated money to fence in the entire site and erect a baseball backstop.

By 1950, Purcell had a faculty of 37 teachers and a student enrollment of 1,100. The high school portion of the site was deeded to Purcell, and in 1971 it built its athletic center on the remaining available land. In 1981, Purcell became coed when it merged with Marian High School to become Purcell Marian. By the late 1990s, it had 60 professionals, 20 support staff, and four Marian brothers overseeing the education of 700 students.

Church Growth 1925-1950s

On Christmas Eve 1929, the parish was informed that its pastor, Father Schengber, had been made a Domestic Prelate by His Holiness, Pope Pius XI. Rev. Msgr. Schengber was invested by Archbishop McNicholas on Jan. 26, 1930, and he continued to serve the parish for more than three more decades until his death Jan. 2, 1963 at the age of 95.

Parishioners remembered him as a learned theologian and a loving pastor. At Sunday Masses, he would ask children catechism questions in front of their parents and families. Associate pastor Rev. Robert Mick (1954-1970) said Msgr. Schengber was an inspiration to him and prayed an hour each morning and nearly an hour each night.

In the 1930s, parishioners packed St. Francis De Sales for every Mass, leaving standing room only. In the 1940s, the music of Martin G. Dumler, a parishioner and local composer helped draw standing room only crowds to Midnight Masses. For Christmas Eve Mass in 1948, Mr. Dumler conducted the church choir and 22 members of the Cincinnati Symphony as they performed a new Mass he wrote.

In 1950, the parish celebrated its centenary with a Pontifical High Mass, including a blessing read during the Mass from Pope Pius XII. In the 1950s, the Holy Name Society encouraged male parishioners to lead good moral lives and help develop the parish. Once a year the St. Francis De Sales chapter marched with other chapters from downtown to Crosley Field for Benediction.

Neighborhood Changes, 1948-1960s

Many large homes were divided up for multiple family units and many of the wealthy moved out to newer suburbs. The socio-economic makeup of the neighborhood changed in the 1950s and 1960s, as thousands of West End families (black and white Appalachian) moved to Walnut Hills and other areas after homes and tenements were bulldozed for Interstate 75.

In 1945, African Americans accounted for 16 percent of the area population. By 1960, the black community grew to 57 percent and by 1965, 88 percent. During the race riots of 1967 and 1968, rioters set fire to storefronts and vandalized much of the area. St. Francis De Sales Church was not damaged, probably because the school is such a great asset to the area. Just as generations before, families moved from crowded Over-the-Rhine to Cincinnati's first suburb, East Walnut Hills, now many left that problem-plagued area for the quiet of newer suburbs .

The 'Sixties and Vatican II

Rev. Monsignor John C. Staunton became pastor in 1963, after Msgr. Schengber passed away. Msgr. Staunton was president of the Ohio Hospital Association and the archdiocesan director of hospitals. He saw to it that every teen-ager in the parish had a summer job. If he could not find a teen a job elsewhere, he would get him or her a job at the parish cemetery.

Rev. Robert Mick ably assisted the pastor, whose hospital association duties in Columbus often kept him away from the parish. Father Mick served until 1970. He is remembered as a man of prayer who enjoyed walking the

neighborhood and talking with residents. He could speak Spanish and ministered to parishioners of Cuban descent. Sunday Masses during this time attracted 2,000 parishioners.

Vatican II brought swift and visible changes. Women stopped wearing hats and gloves to church. The Latin Mass gave way to Mass in English. Benediction, rosary praying, Novenas and Marian devotions grew less frequent as public activities. Vatican II's new liturgical model called for the celebrant to face the congregation for the sacrifice of the Mass. To preserve the historical beauty of the main altar and sanctuary, the first six pews were removed in 1968 and the sanctuary was extended beyond the original communion rails. The parish installed a raised platform and a new, simpler wooden altar with a frontispiece depicting the Last Supper. The congregation was still large in the late 1960s. A popular event of this period was the annual spaghetti supper at the Knights of Columbus Hall on Clayton Street. Also at this time, dances with live bands in the school gymnasium attracted great crowds.

Lean Years, New Focus

Msgr. Staunton succumbed to Hodgkin's disease and died at a young age in 1973. Rev. Bernard H. Bruening became pastor and began holding festivals to raise money for the church. For a long time the wealthy parish had avoided festivals and bingo, but now it could no longer count on affluent donors from the area for support. By 1980, Sunday Mass attendance had dwindled to about 600. The demographics of the neighborhood kept changing. Many Catholics moved away, and others who remained were wary of the church's location. The chain link fence around the school was rusty, and church and school were surrounded by dilapidated buildings. And although some parishioners were African American, the church at that time was not very successful in opening itself to blacks in the area.

But the parish was not without its strengths. It remained a close-knit "family." In 1983, the city and Cincinnati Historical Society recognized the church's historical significance when it designated it a neighborhood landmark.

The H.O.M.E. program also gave the parish a new focus. Founded in 1976 by Sisters of Mercy Mary Ann Fuerst and Alice Marie Soete, the program ministers to the needs of the elderly in the area. The sisters take communion to shut-ins, sponsor prayer services at nursing homes, help the elderly fill out forms for food stamps, housing and medical care. The sisters also offer medical care and money for prescriptions and rent. Volunteers lift the spirits of the elderly just by being there and helping to ease the loneliness many of them face.

The Marianists

In 1985, the archdiocese transferred Father Bruening to Our Lady of Good Hope in Miamisburg,, and the Marianists offered to take over the parish. They had a long-standing connection to De Sales Corner from running Purcell Marian High School. Rev. Charles Bergedick, S.M., was the first Marianist pastor.

The parish turned its attention toward stewardship of the Earth. Father Bergedick celebrated a number of annual Earth Day liturgies, featuring giant images of the globe, readings about preserving creation and suggestions for conserving natural resources. One year, a simulated waterfall was used to show the sacredness of water throughout our lives.

In early 1985, the parish council commissioned Dorothea and James Kennedy to create a relief sculpture of St. Francis De Sales to decorate the area above the central church doors. A seven-foot-tall relief, composed of more than 160 terra cotta tiles, was installed that September and blessed.

In 1987, the parish included about 300 families.

In 1990, the Rev. Edward Jach, S.M. became pastor. Father Ed soon made some necessary changes: He reduced the Mass schedule from four Masses each weekend to two. After the change and removal of the old kneelers, more than 100 people left the parish. Average weekend Mass attendance dropped to 204 in 1990 and to as low as 175 in 1994. In the late 1990s, a renewed emphasis on the liturgy and a new vision for St. Francis De Sales brought the numbers back up to an average of about 250 each week.

Throughout the 1990s, several physical improvements were made in the church. In 1990, the Woodburn Avenue Task Force, part of the East Walnut Hills Assembly, led an effort to light the church exterior, as a neighborhood landmark, with three lighting fixtures. The parish also overhauled the parish family residence in 1992 at a cost

of \$45,000. The interior was rearranged to create new office space and outfit it with new furniture. In 1996, the parish commissioned Cincinnati artist Thom Shaw to make two large wood block prints which hang at the end of each transept.



Sesquicentennial 1999

To celebrate the 150-year mark for St. Francis De Sales, the parish undertook a \$200,000 church renovation, paid for by a bequest. Workers used 250 gallons of paint to revitalize the interior which had not been painted since 1961. The marble altars were washed and sealed.

Over a three-year period, the parish acquired three of the four parcels of land east of the school along Madison Road to Hackberry Street. After the roof of the building immediately east of the school collapsed, that property was condemned and the parish purchased it using funds from Calvary Cemetery. Sister Carol Ann Wenning, R.S. M., the school principal, obtained grant money to blacktop the property for a playground and parking lot. In 1998, the

parish bought a second lot east of the first, again using proceeds from the parish-owned cemetery. That lot also was paved over for play area and parking. In 1999, Calvary monies again were used to buy the corner lot. It is used for parking for the parish and Purcell Marian High School.

On Sept. 1, 1999, Holy Angels Church, located about one mile east on Madison Road in Hyde Park, officially combined with St. Francis De Sales Church. An archdiocesan task force reviewing demographics and staffing at churches throughout the archdiocese recommended that Holy Angels close. Holy Angels was founded in 1859. Before closing in 1999, Holy Angels had about 500 attending weekend Mass.

De Sales Crossings

A new vision energizes St. Francis De Sales parish through the combined ministries of De Sales Crossings. This voluntary collaborative group includes St. Francis De Sales Parish and School, De Sales Crossings Marianist Community, Purcell Marian High School, the Mercy Sisters' HOME program, Mercy Connections, Mercy Professional Services and Calvary Catholic Cemetery. On Sept. 23, 2001, the HOME program celebrated 25 years of service. The De Sales Crossings Marianist Community expanded to a total of eight Brothers living in two places: De Sales Rectory and at 1516 Chapel Street. Each ministry in De Sales Crossings can do its job better by drawing on the strengths of the others.

The new partnership is even manifested concretely in the way additions to the parish school and Purcell Marian bring the two more closely together. Each new purchase of property at the site strengthens the interconnectedness of De Sales Crossings. The property behind the church along Woodburn Avenue will serve as Purcell Marian's first sports field.

All parties are excited about the possibilities that can flow from the new collaborative spirit.

Building Projects, 2000-2001

In 2000, the parish decided to air-condition the church. Because in 1983 it had been declared a historical building, both inside and outside, approval was required from the city's Historic Conservation Office. After many harried meetings and negotiations, the office finally issued its Certificate of Appropriateness for the systems. A new water boiler also was installed for heating the church. The entire project was valued at \$310,000 and took a full year to complete.

In October 2000, the parish broke ground for the new St. Francis De Sales parish center. The ground floor will provide the school with a larger cafeteria and serve as a meeting hall for the parish. School offices and a kitchen will also occupy the first floor. Mercy Connections will occupy the second floor. The Mercy Sisters' HOME

program will use the basement for its activities. The new building cost a little more than \$3 million. It will enhance the ministries of both parish and school for the 21st century.

Special thanks to the anonymous authors who recorded two histories of the early years of the church and to all those who helped Chad Engelland compile the history of the later years.

Among those contributing to the record: Rev. Ed Jach, S.M., Sister Carol Ann Wenning, R.S.M., Sister Mary Jerome Buchert, Dr. Rae E. Hartman, Larry and Rosemary Welage, Eugene Lang, Arthur Ruff, Rev. Robert Mick, Donald and Mary Guilfoyle, Dorothea Kennedy, Norma Jean Moore, Rev. Bernard Bruening, Cynthia Heinrich, Jan Rich, Bro. David Betz, S.M., and Thomas Siemers.

Pastors of St. Francis De Sales Parish 1849-present:

Rev. Michael A. Herzog, 1849-52

Rev. John N. Schmid, 1852-60

Rev. Francis A. Ostrop, 1860-61

Rev. A. Haberle, 1861

Rev. J.J. Menge, 1861-73

Rev. August Fischer, 1873-78

Rev. Charles J. Schmidt, 1878-83

Rev. August M. Quatman, 1883-1909

Rev. Francis M. Lamping, 1909-21

Rt. Rev. Msgr J. Henry Schengber, 1921-63

Rev. Msgr. John C. Staunton, 1963-73

Rev. Bernard H. Bruening, 1973-85

Rev. Charles Bergedick, S.M., 1985-90

Rev. Edward M. Jach, S.M., 1990-2010

Rev. Eugene Contadino, S.M., 2010-Present



St. Francis De Sales School 1850s-2001

The parish's first school started in a little stone building at the corner of Hackberry Street and William H. Taft Road. A Mr. Wortman ran it. Pupils came from Pleasant Ridge, Fulton, Madisonville, Columbia and West Hill. The teacher's living quarters were upstairs, and the school occupied one large room on the first floor. All grades assembled in the room. The older children helped teach the younger ones. School began with 7:30 Mass and continued until 11 a.m., resumed at 1 p.m. and dismissed at 4 p.m. – except in the winter when it closed at three to allow the pupils who lived in

Pleasant Ridge, Madisonville and other suburbs to catch rides on the returning milk wagons and arrive home before dark.

In around 1865, another room was needed, so a Miss Deters taught the three R's to the girls in the room on the second floor. About 1872, three Sisters of Charity took charge. The organist Mr. Toeschner taught the older boys, while the sisters instructed the younger boys and all of the girls. Since the school building wasn't big enough to accommodate the growing number of pupils, some children had to be taught in the sisters' home. School furniture consisted of long desks and rudely constructed benches for six pupils each. Teaching aids such as maps, charts and colorful textbooks were not available. Instruction was limited to reading, writing and arithmetic.

Many fond memories were associated with the drinking fountain of those days – a tin bucket and dipper! School wasn't all study. The children also had chores. The girls swept and dusted, made the fires and, for special

occasions, washed the windows. The boys brought the fuel, coal and wood for the large stove which almost cooked those near it yet failed to send its warmth to those seated farther away. Despite its limitations, the little school sent out young men and women who, because of their loyalty and devotion, were the pride of the parish.

Larger School

The old stone school had grown overcrowded. When the parish acquired the property on Madison road, it began construction of the present school in May 1877 and completed it in December.

The Sisters of Charity continued their splendid work of developing the culture of the soul along with that of the mind up until 1920. Then the Sisters of St. Ursula, whose convent and academy are located at 1339 East McMillan Street only a few blocks from St. Francis De Sales Church, took over the education of the parish youngsters.

The school also assisted other Catholic institutions. In 1915, St. Xavier College (later Xavier University) formed its first basketball team but lacked a gymnasium on campus. The team practiced one afternoon a week each at St. Aloysius and St. Francis De Sales. The school's third-floor auditorium, lined with pillars, was good for practice but too small to host regulation basketball games. Xavier's team went 6-4 that year.

The Ursuline Sisters

Sister M. Catherine Worthan, O.S.U., was the first Ursuline principal. Under her guidance, the school increased in efficiency and numbers of pupils. To her Catholic education meant to develop all the faculties of mind, soul and body. She was convinced there is an angel hidden in every human being, and that it is the mission of the educator to find and develop that angelic spirit. She was intent on bringing out the Christ in every child under her care. In 1928, the children, parents and priests regretted to see her leave when she was elected Mother Superior of her community.

She later appointed Sister M. Dorothea Overberg, O.S.U., as new principal of St. Francis De Sales School. Sister Dorothea guided the parochial school with prudence and wisdom for four decades. She devoted all her energy to developing Christians after the mind of Christ and His Church. By the 1950s, she was assisted by nine to 10 sisters of her community and several capable lay teachers.

The sisters made sure the students developed a strong devotion to the Blessed Mother, and each year's May Crowning was a celebrated event. Each October, Sister Dorothea would lead classes one at a time around the school grounds to pray the Rosary. Students went to Mass every day.

In 1966, parishioners surprised their much-loved principal by giving her a trip to Rome in appreciation for her many years of service to the school. The next year, after 45 years of teaching at the school, she retired. She died Nov. 27, 1986.

Demographic Changes

When the school began in the 1850s, students came from all over the city. Later, most of the children were from families in the parish, and all could walk home for lunch. But in the 1950s, the population of the neighborhood changed, and fewer Catholic families lived in the area. The school expanded its reach and drew students from the inner city. Student enrollment grew more racially diverse. The first African American to attend the school was a third-grade boy in 1953. By 1976, the school was 69 percent African American and only 55 percent Catholic. From 1967 to 1977, the school had a succession of principals: Sister Mary William Luxford, O.S.U., Frank McElwian, a layman and artist, Sister Mary Jerome Buchert, O.S.U. When Sister Cynthia Heinrich, O.S.U., was made principal in 1977, De Sales School had 185 students.

Moment of Trial

In 1976, St. Francis De Sales made the front of The Cincinnati Enquirer's metro section and also was the subject of stories in the Cincinnati Post. The archdiocese decided to close Holy Cross School in Mount Adams because it did not have enough students. The archdiocese chose to send Holy Cross students to all-white St. Mary School in Hyde Park. That meant busing them directly past racially diverse St. Francis De Sales School.

The Archdiocesan Social Action Commission, St. Francis De Sales parishioners, the Black Catholic Caucus and others cried foul and charged racial segregation.

Associate Pastor Rev. Martin Carter, an African American, was particularly outspoken against the plan. In the end, the archdiocese decided to let parents choose where to send their kids instead of making them attend St. Mary. None of the 55 Holy Cross students went to St. Francis De Sales. They opted instead for the larger St. Mary, with an enrollment of 428 that year. Critics continued to charge racism, and the Cincinnati Public School Board threatened to withhold public monies from St. Mary. But in a federal court case, defenders argued successfully that St. Francis was not as Catholic as Holy Cross parents wanted, because 45 percent of its students were not Catholic. After the dispute, Archbishop Joseph Bernadin celebrated a Mass of reconciliation with St. Francis De Sales parish.

The Mercy Sisters

In 1978-1979, the school received a much-needed renovation using \$62,685 in grant money, including some from the Jergens Foundation. Improvements included fixing the roof, installing new windows and painting the exterior.

In spring 1983, the Ursalines' 63 years of running De Sales School ended when the Sisters could not find anyone to replace the departing Principal Sister Cynthia. Fortunately, for the school and parish, the Mercy Sisters took over, and Sister Carol Ann Wenning, R.S.M., began as principal.

Sister Carol Ann's leadership brought vitality to the school and increased enrollment.

On March 11, 1988, at about 3:30 a.m., a fire broke out in the school kindergarten room. Luckily, the brick walls and reinforced ceiling confined the blaze and minimized damage. Fire investigators discovered a record player had been left in the "pause" mode, overheated and short-circuited. Teachers had been scheduled for a day of in-service training entitled "finding God in Stress." Instead they volunteered to clean up the smoke damage at the school. To Sister Carol Ann, confining the fire to one room was the Lord saying, "There is something good happening here in this school and I want it to continue." Damage totaled about \$30,000.

Many grant monies have allowed the inner city school to keep its computer and other technological resources up-to-date and make safety and other improvements in the building. Teachers provide high-quality Catholic education for urban youth with an ecumenical emphasis on what they share in common. The school attends to the whole person, nurturing students' social, emotional, spiritual and intellectual needs. To this end, the school also includes a counselor, psychologist and programs on bereavement and substance abuse. These and other programs can help students in times of trouble to draw strength from their faith. For many students, De Sales School is the only source of stability in their turbulent lives. For many, it is a home away from home.



De Sales School: 2000-Present

In May 2001, Sister Carol Ann after 18 years serving De Sales was called to other duties in her community's formation program, and the parish recruited William Shula, Ed.D., to become the new principal. Dr. Shula was a principal in Middletown for many years and recently served as superintendent of the Bethel-Tate School District. Buses transport 60 percent of the school's 230 students to and from school. Of the 230, only 25 are Catholic, but most are practicing Christians. Many are Baptist. Fifty years ago, the students were all Caucasian. Today, only two are not African American.

Eighty percent of De Sales graduates go on to Catholic high school. Most go next door to Purcell Marian High School.