

Early History of St. Vincent's School

St. Vincent's school has been in existence since 1883. In its early years it occupied the middle portion, or first floor, of the old St. Vincent's church building.

There was something unique in the opening history of St. Vincent's school. The first pastor, Rev. Edward M. Smith, C. M., was a special friend of Rev. Thomas Edwards, first pastor of the Annunciation church. Knowing in how great esteem Father Edwards ever held the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who had charge of the Annunciation school, Father Smith remarked to a friend one day while speaking on the school question, "When I have a school, Father Edwards' Sisters will conduct it for me."

One afternoon, August 22nd, 1883, some years after the saintly Father Edwards had gone to his reward, while the Sisters of the Annunciation school were recreating on the porch of their modest little convent, a tall stately clergyman approached them and, after a cordial invitation, began, "Well, I want ye to come over and teach my school. Good Father Edwards promised me that his Sisters would do this for me as soon as I was ready; now I am ready. I have a sufficient number of children in the parish and I wish to start my school. When I built the church it was with the intention of having it serve as a church, a rectory, and a school. Accordingly, I had the middle portion made into four large school rooms, but it has taken nigh to a decade of years to realize my heart's cherished desire."

The superior, Sister Mary Purification, B. V. M., replied to the good priest, "Father, Sister Mary Agatha and I expect to go to Dubuque tonight to see our Mother General. We shall present your appeal to Mother and plead earnestly for the success of your cause."

There was no delay and Father Smith, receiving a favorable response, announced on the following Sunday to his somewhat amazed congregation that the next day (Monday) the Sisters of the B. V. M. would take charge of their children. He bade the parents to bring their little ones to the Sisters and have them registered for school.

Singularly enough, three Sisters of the Annunciation school, Sister Mary Ascension, the first superior of St. Vincent's school, Sister Mary Paschal and Sister Mary Gregory, together with Sister Mary Justa from St. Aloysius' school, had received letters on August 25th, 1883, from Mother Clarke, Mother General of the Sisters of Charity of the B. V. M., assigning them to the new St. Vincent's school.

On Sunday afternoon, August 26th, 1883, Father Smith returned to the convent of the Annunciation and, holding up the letter which he had received from Mother Clarke the previous afternoon, exclaimed, "Well, ye are coming. Today I announced to my people that ye would be with us tomorrow, as I want my children started in school before the public schools begin. Ye can ride over for a few days until I have your home ready. I shall soon have it, and, until that time, ye can have dinner every day at my house."

In two weeks, good Father Smith had the home ready for the Sisters. The rooms were comfortable and furnished except the parlor which was left perfectly bare, not even a picture adorning the walls.

Then conducting the Sisters for the first time through their new home (a dwelling on Fremont Street, South of Webster Avenue) Father Smith remarked, as he passed through the cheerless parlor, "This is not your part. This is the people's. They will take care of it."

The Sunday before the Sisters entered their residence, the second Sunday after the opening of school, Father Smith extended a pressing invitation to all the ladies of the parish to visit the Sisters in their new home. How the call was responded to was a notable event in the early history of St. Vincent's.

Dear Father Smith would often say, "Father Edwards kept his promise well: he sent me the Sisters just when I needed them and on short notice, too."

St. Vincent's school opened with a registration of ninety-seven pupils occupying two school rooms for about two weeks. The number of children increasing, however, the other two rooms were called into use and at the close of the school year there was an enrollment of two hundred and fifty-three.

During the first two weeks of school, while the first home at 235 (old number) Fremont Street was being renovated and furnished, the Sisters walked daily from the Annunciation school. The street cars then were not running at convenient distances.

Many pleasant memories are connected with those early days. Every morning nearly the whole school, boys and girls, would start on their way to meet the Sisters and would accompany them to school; then again in the evening the children would escort the Sisters half way over the prairies to the convent. Many an amusing scene occurred on the journey. The girls would vie with one another in their eagerness to get nearest the Sisters. The boys would scamper ahead and pelt with stones every little dog within sight or they would climb up the trees like squirrels and rest on the highest limbs, whistling their merry tunes. When the Sisters caught up with them, then the boys would hurry down and go ahead to repeat their rollicking sport.

Before there was any school in St. Vincent's parish, the children were accustomed to see and frequently to meet the white bonnet Sisters from St. Joseph's hospital on Garfield Avenue. The children greatly revered the Daughters of St. Vincent de Paul and when the black bonnet Sisters of the B. V. M. made their appearance, there were mingled feelings of fear and curiosity. One little tot said to her mother when she was approaching the new Sisters, "Mamma, I don't want to see the black Sisters, they're naughty. I want to see the white Sisters 'cause they're good." The lady assured her little daughter that all Sisters were good and said that soon her child would like the new Sisters, too. But the little girl contended, "I know the white Sisters are the goodest 'cause Father Smith won't let the black Sisters near the white Sisters in the church."

In less than two years' time St. Vincent's school had increased to such an extent that more rooms were needed. Thereupon the four spacious rooms with large dressing rooms were converted into six well lighted and

ventilated, sunny classrooms. New dressing rooms were taken from the wide corridor which extended the length of the building.

Realizing that St. Vincent's parish was steadily growing and with it the school, good Father Smith, with the aid of his Community, purchased the ground on the south side of Webster Avenue, between Sheffield Avenue and Osgood Street, with the intention of building there the new St. Vincent's school and convent. However, after some time this ground was sold.

Father Smith's health began to fail in 1887 and he was ordered to go South for a much needed rest.

Rev. J. A. Moloney, C. M., was appointed the successor of the revered founder of the parish. His stay, however, was only of a few months.

Rev. Thomas H. Abbott, C. M., next took charge of the parish and school, but soon returned to his cherished missionary field and the Rev. Felix Guedry, C. M., became pastor in his place.

Observing the crowded condition of the parochial school and having at heart the welfare of the lambs of his flock, Father Guedry immediately set to work to devise ways and means for the erection of another building. Accordingly, the ground on which the present St. Vincent's school is located, and which had been purchased long before (1881) for school purposes by Father Smith, was broken for a new school. On a Sunday afternoon at 4 o'clock, July 27th, 1890, the corner stone was laid. In the absence of His Grace, Archbishop Feehan, the Very Rev. Vicar General Daniel J. Dowling, pastor of St. Bridget's Church performed the principal ceremony.

The basement floor of the school is of solid stone masonry, and the corner stone which bears the simple inscription "1890" was placed at the southwest corner of the structure. The walls of the school were blessed and the corner stone laid by Vicar General Dowling, who officiated in the absence of the Archbishop, who was attending the conference of Archbishops then in session in Boston. A tin box which was placed in the center of the stone contained the following articles: copies of the Chicago daily papers and a Latin document describing the present condition of political affairs and giving the names of the chief government, state and municipal officials and the name of the present Pope, Leo XIII.

At the conclusion of the services, Vicar Dowling introduced Rev. F. V. Nugent, C. M., president of St. Vincent's College, Cape Girardeau, Mo. Quotations from Father Nugent's address follow:

"The setting apart of a structure to be dedicated to the service of God has always been in the eyes of the Catholic people a great event; therefore, the ceremony of the present occasion fills us with zeal. Not indeed has the Catholic Church been a stranger to us, for it was she warmed the heart of Columbus when he dared the mighty waters and raised the cross on the mountains and planted the Catholic faith on virgin soil; yes, she it was who warmed the hearts of those apostolic men whom Bancroft makes mention of in his works." . . . "The Catholic Church is not at all foreign; it came to this country with Columbus and is as distinctly American as American civilization is." . . . "Now let me say a word about our future men and women. Our good and noble Catholic women are ever ready to stand by us in all our trials and afflictions, and you will see them surrounding the altar of God, yes three women to one man. There, before the altar, you will find the Catholic woman, communing with her God

and begging blessings for her family. Yes, my dear Catholic women, God bless you and may God prosper you on your good errands; may He pour down abundant blessings on you and yours." . . . "And now a word to our men, especially our young men. Upon you depends a great responsibility and that is the advancement of the Catholic Church. You know by experience without my telling you the dangers that encompass you on every side in this great city, and how necessary it is for you to keep a watchful eye over your every step; you must raise your thought to a higher Power and not depend upon your own weak selves. My dear young men, you cannot be good Americans unless you are good Catholics. Now if this is so, what a responsibility rests upon you." . . . "Do then, I beg of you, my good Catholic men, young and old, persevere in the footsteps of your holy religion and conquer the great demon who is trying to destroy this great and glorious universe, and when you have grown old and the hoary years of old age have come upon you, then you can look back and say, 'I have gained my crown, I have persevered in the way of the Lord,' and as you will live here to see those walls advance and raise their pinnacles heavenward, you will cry out with those dear and holy Vincentian fathers whom you have amongst your Excelsior, higher still. Still higher."

In 1889 the Sisters moved from the rented house on Fremont street to 181 (now 2132) Osgood Street, a wooden structure across from the school. This building was purchased as a temporary home so that the Sisters might be nearer the Church and school. Here the Sisters and visiting Sisters who came for the laying of the corner stone of the new school and convent derived the full benefit of the eloquent sermon delivered on that occasion by the Rev. Father Nugent, C. M.

The Academy as our school was then called was in our charge, and at that time we were conducting flourishing schools in the parishes of the Annunciation, Sacred Heart, St. Charles Borromeo, St. Columba's, St. Pius's, St. Bridget's and St. Aloysius', Chicago, as well as in many other cities of the United States.

In 1891, a full year after the laying of the corner stone, the school was blessed with the usual ceremonies on the Feast of the Assumption. The children marched in solemn procession through the building, singing the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, while Father Guedry, accompanied by the altar boys, blessed the rooms and corridors.

In September of the same year the new school was opened with a large enrollment. It was built to accommodate three hundred pupils and three hundred and forty six applied for admission. The large assembly hall on the top floor was then used by the pupils.

The year the new St. Vincent's school was opened, Father Guedry, C.M., introduced the children's Mass, a custom new in the parish, for Father Smith had never been in favor of a special Mass for the children. It was his opinion that the right place for children, when fulfilling the obligation of assisting at the Holy Sacrifice, was in the pew at the side of either father or mother. Father Smith felt that children accustomed to a children's Mass under the eye of a teacher would often look upon this sacred duty as a part of school life and that later, when out of school and left to themselves, they would probably ignore the solemn obligation of hearing Mass on a Sunday or a feast day of precept.

The Sisters who opened St. Vincent's school found the children simply a marvel in their knowledge of Christian doctrine. Not only could they

recite question and answer of the entire catechism, but they were able to give a clear and satisfactory explanation on most of the practical questions relating to their faith. This was because in the early days, before the Sisters took charge, Rev. Father Smith would himself instruct the children in the catechism three afternoons of the week from four to five o'clock.

The southeast corner of the church grounds, clad each recurring summer in nature's own soft green, offered a most welcome spot to the children during the warm afternoons when obliged by their zealous pastor to attend the catechetical instructions. Here on the green they would wait and play until summoned by the little bell to God's house, where the good priests were in readiness to instruct them in the service and love of God, their heavenly Father. Later, the children's favorite corner was converted into a green house, one of the largest and most renowned in the city.

Mr. Charles McCarthy, the florist, took the keenest pleasure in always keeping the altars of St. Vincent's church profusely adorned with choice, fragrant flowers. This place, so long hallowed by the innocent hearts of the little children, and later, guarded and beautified by a veritable bower of nature's choicest flowers, seemed only waiting to be the chosen spot of one of God's own temples - the beautiful St. Vincent's.

When in 1891 Rev. Father Smith returned to resume the work of pastorate, the people rejoiced, knowing that he wished to build a new church. How earnestly he waited for the time when he might offer the holy sacrifice in a new temple. "Soon our new church will be finished," said he. "I am longing to read Mass there, and my first Mass will be all for you, my dear people." However, God willed otherwise; and like the Israelites of old, who came within sight of the Promised Land but could not enter, Father Smith was deprived of the happy privilege of celebrating Mass in the new church. He lived to see the completion of the building and then laid down the burden of life, cheerfully accepting the sufferings that came to him. The first Mass in the new church was a Requiem over his remains. We trust it brought "rest" to his noble soul.

The Sisters who opened St. Vincent's school were as follows: Sister Mary Ascension, first superior, assisted by Sister M. Paschal, Sister Mary Justa and Sister Mary Gregory; Sister Mary Aquilina was housekeeper; there was no music teacher the first year.

The list of Sisters who served as superior is as follows: Sister Mary Ascension, six years; Sister Mary Caroline, one and one half years; Sister Mary Octavia, six years; Sister Mary Ephrem, three years; Sister Mary Agnella, two years, Sister Mary Edmunda, three years; Sister Mary Euthalia, three years; Sister Mary Edmunda, one year; Sister Mary Leandre, four years; Sister Mary Gregory, six years; Sister Mary Rosina, one year; Sister Mary Hermenigild, six years; Sister Mary Gregory, who returned to be Superior in August 1926, just in time for the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of St. Vincent's parish. All thanked Sister for the detailed and beautiful account of the first days of St. Vincent's, from which the annals are taken. Sister was Superior only nine months, when death claimed her suddenly and took her to her much merited reward. Sister Mary Chionia who was Councillor General acted as superior until August 15th, 1927. Sister Mary Alexia was then assigned superior.

After the assembly hall of St. Vincent's school had been remodeled into two large class rooms, there was sufficient space for the grades and also for High School pupils. However, after Rev. P. V. Byrne, C. M. came here in 1899, the number of pupils steadily increased and the demand for extra teachers and extra rooms became imperative. To supply these needs, Father Byrne, C. M., in 1902 had another building erected on the rear grounds of St. Vincent's school. This building was made into twelve rooms. Thereupon, three of the rooms of the front building were converted into living rooms for the Sisters, while some of the rooms, formerly occupied by the grades, were given over to the High School department, which now numbered eighty students.

After some years (in January 1911), the High School department was moved into the St. Vincent Lyceum building, 2233 Sheffield Ave., Very Rev. F. X. McCabe, C.M., being then pastor.

In the new quarters and more closely under De Paul University, the name of the High School was changed to the "De Paul High School for Girls." In 1917 the Doyle apartment building at 2244 Osgood Street was purchased and it was fitted up into a High School. However, the space was limited and there were difficulties on account of the strict city regulations concerning school buildings. Before long some of the classes were transferred to the De Paul Academy building. There were some advantages here and some drawbacks, one of which was the stairways. It was a long climb to the fourth floor, at least for some. Finally, in 1921, the De Paul High School for Girls was closed in favor of the new Immaculata High School.

Many persons regretted to see the De Paul High School go, for it had been instrumental in the education of many young ladies and was considered an institution needed in this neighborhood. Many a type of Catholic womanhood went forth from the doors.

Certainly the De Paul High School and its predecessor, St. Vincent's High School, did good work in their day. Many pleasant memories remain in the minds of teachers and alumnae.

Sister Mary Lambertina was the first superior of the De Paul High School at 2244 Osgood Street. Previous to that, there had been one superior for grades and high school classes. Next, Sister Mary Leandre took charge and was here when the closing came, in June, 1921.

The last junior class of girls repeatedly begged Very Rev. Father Levan to enable them to get their diplomas from De Paul. After much entreaty and some delay, space was provided on the first floor of the De Paul Academy building and a lay teacher, Miss Marion Schuster, was engaged to teach the girls. After a successful year, the girls received their diplomas and the chapter was closed, but not without some feeling of sadness.

The following Sisters taught in St. Vincent's High School and De Paul High School at various times: Sister Mary Gregory, Sister Mary Immaculata, Sister Mary Roberta, Sister Mary Gervase, Sister Mary Euthalia, Sister Mary Hortense, Sister Mary Richard, Sister Mary Ludovine, Sister Mary Remi, Sister Mary Tertulla, Sister Mary Ildephonse, Sister Mary Clare, Sister Mary Callista, Sister Mary St. Henry, Sister Mary Helene, Sister Mary Feliciana and Sister Mary Angelita.

The new addition to St. Vincent's parochial school in 1926, costing approximately \$75,000.00 is a recent testimony to the interest of Father Levan in St. Vincents.

The six large classrooms are models of construction, while the corridors and toilet facilities on each floor tend to the comfort of those children in the rear building also. Father Levan has renovated the convent portion thereby giving more space to the Sisters. Other improvements were made for the convenience and material welfare of the Sisters. Each Sister having the comforts of a private sleeping room equipped with large clothes closet and a wash bowl with hot and cold water. Two large lavatories and shower room. A roof garden was also added for the pleasure of the Sisters who enjoy air. The Chapel was enlarged, new pews were purchased and all the doors in the Chapel except one for the entrance were closed and the upper parts were taken out and French windows inserted.

A Mother's Club was organized in 1925 to aid the School and the Sisters. They have furnished the private rooms with Crucifixes, desks, cabinets and the new style bed spreads. The school rooms each have a beautiful large Crucifix, Teacher's desk, swivel chair, two visiting chairs and book case.

* * * * *