

A Brief History of St. Rose of Lima Academy

St. Rose of Lima parish had its beginnings in the 1830s, when priests from Newark and Madison said Mass and taught catechism in the homes of a small number of Catholics in the Millburn/Springfield area. By 1852, numbers had grown sufficiently to start a mission parish, and on December 26, 1852, a small, newly built wood church was dedicated by Monsignor John Loughlin, representing Bishop John Hughes of New York, as there was yet no Newark diocese. The church was built on land donated by Daniel Coughlan on Morris Avenue in Springfield, near the intersection with Short Hills Avenue. A wall map in the Springfield Public Library shows this parcel of land. The original wood church was 40 feet by 30 feet and was built at a cost of \$1,600.00, with donated labor. The pastor, Rev. Bernard McQuaid, who later became the Bishop of Rochester, New York, was a driving force in founding the parish as well as starting schools in several Morris County parishes.

In 1860, the priests of Seton Hall College were assigned to assist the parish. In the words of Fr. McQuaid, "It did the young priests good to ride over from the college on a crispy winter's morning to get a slight taste of the pleasures of missionary life." In the late 1860s, six acres of land were purchased at the corner of Millburn and Short Hills Avenues under the direction of the next pastor, Fr. Louis Schneider, a professor at Seton Hall. The property included a house and a wooden building used as a hat factory. Such factories were found throughout the area as Millburn was well known in those years for its many paper mills and related industries. In 1869, the former hat factory was converted for use as a school, and St. Rose of Lima School officially opened with 40 students and 2 lay teachers. Fr. Schneider, in accordance with his wishes, was buried on the property. His white cross tombstone can be found at the top of the hill in the cemetery, immediately to the right of the walk as it rises from Millburn Avenue.

Among the school's earliest teachers were M.R. Plunkett and Miss Emily Salt, sister of Fr. Salt from the diocesan college. They were succeeded by sisters from an order of Notre Dame, who taught at the school for several years. In 1879, the present convent was erected as a school, and the Sisters of Charity of Convent Station came to staff the school; they remained as the teaching order through 1952.

In 1880, the original church was towed by horses 1/3 mile to share the Short Hills site. The daily progress of the move, which took 6 weeks to complete, was cited as a headline community affair throughout the autumn of 1880. Once united, the parish and school community continued to grow, spurred by an influx of immigrants from Ireland, Germany and Italy who came to this part of New Jersey in the hope of finding employment on the large estates of the area.

In 1909, under the guidance of pastor Rev. James T. Brown, the original church was replaced by a brick Gothic Romanesque-style church, the basis of our present structure. The debt incurred by the construction of the new church was still a problem 20 years later when Rev. Leo Gardiner succeeded Fr. Brown as pastor. St. Rose was by no means a wealthy parish at the time. Still, the church and school were high priorities for the parishioners, though the cost of maintaining parish services was a sacrifice for many. Despite the financial difficulties that arose from the Great Depression in the 1930s, with Fr. Gardiner's leadership and the extra dedication of parishioners, some progress was made toward restoring the financial health of the parish. Letters exchanged by Fr. Gardiner and the Bishop's office demonstrated support for building a new school and renewing the life of the parish.

In 1931, the construction of a new school building at an estimated cost of \$70,000.00 was completed, allowing the older 1879 school to be renovated and used exclusively as a convent. The first classes in the new brick building on the corner of Millburn and Short Hills Avenues began with a Solemn Dedication on September 12, 1931. Bishop Thomas Walsh officiated, and the sermon was given by Msgr. William Griffin. The enrollment was 44 boys and 50 girls, with 5 sisters of charity and 1 lay teacher providing instruction. Only the auditorium/gymnasium and classrooms on the lower level and first floor were finished, and students were grouped in double-grade classrooms: grades 1 – 2, 3 – 4, 5 – 6, and 7 – 8. Four bowling alleys were installed in the lower level, and many social events of the parish took place in the school building in addition to the continued education of parish children. Bowling leagues were established and active during the '30s and early '40s. Many a Friday evening, commonly known as “smokers,” found local Catholic men cheering on well-known prizefighters in the gym, where a ring was set up for bouts.

By 1945, when Rev. John F. Ryan became pastor, the local community was changing. The economy was vigorous and expansive, and the numbers of parishioners and schoolchildren were exploding. Once again, the parish was outgrowing its physical facilities. In 1952, the Romanesque-style church was expanded into an enlarged Colonial-style church and rectory at a cost, along with renovations and additions to the school building, of over \$1 million. Fr. Ryan urged parishioners to support a drive for funds that would change the face of the parish. He offered them a “Retrospective” in which he spoke of the hundred-year-old history of the parish and asked them to “show that we are worthy followers of those who with so little did so much.” He continued: “In all things that give life meaning, that enable us to live for more than this Earth, the Church is our foundation and our guide. Spiritual truth, God’s saving grace, strength and comfort and hope in life’s journey come from Her.” Fr. Ryan was active in all phases of the building and remodeling. He was also a frequent visitor to the classrooms. Sister Carmela Marie, SC, remembered her first year of teaching in 1946, and how the children were delighted when Fr. Ryan would show up in her classroom with his big, black cape and encircle them, and how they would laugh, leaving her to restore order.

By 1958, growth was so great that a third floor was added to the school above the gym, and an archway connecting the school to the convent and serving as the main entrance to the school was completed. During the 1970s, the gym was renovated and the kitchen updated as the student population continued to grow, and parents organized an effort to establish a school library. Since 1986 a preschool has been an integral part of St. Rose. In 1998, further renovations converted the archway into the present-day entrance containing the School Office, Principal’s Office and Conference Room, and provided space for a music room, art room and computer lab in the now adjoining convent building. A new playground with up-to-date surface and equipment was installed by the Home School Association in 2001. In 2007, at a cost of \$160,000.00, a project to renovate and modernize the school’s science lab was undertaken as a memorial to science teacher Oy Ling Chun, who died in December 2005. The project was completed under the direction of a volunteer committee of school parents and parish officials. The state-of-the-art lab opened to students on November 18, 2007, and was officially dedicated at the start of Catholic Schools’ Week, on January 27, 2008.

The Congregation of Sisters of Notre Dame from the Motherhouse in Ridgefield, Connecticut, had been the teaching order since 1953 and remained until 1975. Since then, lay and religious principals and teachers have continued to provide the academic excellence for which St. Rose has long been known. Lay leadership in the form of a School Advisory Board and an active Home School Association has been in place since the early '70s. These parent-leadership organizations were started under the tutelage and pastorship of Bishop John Dougherty.

In the winter of 2007, under the leadership of Msgr. George R. Trabold, Pastor, and Karen P. Fasanella, Ed.D, Principal, St. Rose was reaccredited by the Middle States Association, culminating a successful three year process toward reaccreditation with the completion of a schoolwide project on differentiated instruction. Long-range planning strategies initiated by the School Advisory Board have also ensured the vitality of the school by providing for staff compensation that exceeds archdiocesan standards and a strong tuition and fundraising structure for the school. These forward-looking efforts, coupled with a rigorous academic curriculum, contributed to the school being granted Academy status by the Archdiocese of Newark; the school was officially renamed St. Rose of Lima Academy on January 24, 2008.

St. Rose of Lima Academy looks to the future with the Academy Advisory Board's establishment of the Annual Fund. The Annual Fund will finance further capital improvement projects throughout the school, including the installation of a brand-new gym floor and the construction of a new Media/Library Center. In the words of Msgr. Trabold, "These efforts demonstrate the remarkable things that can be achieved when the various components of our community work together. These projects will not only be an educational benefit to our students, but will inspire them to dream dreams and strive for greatness in all they do."

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