

# St. Mary's School in Melrose Weathers Change, and Grows Stronger over 100 Years

By Brother Robert Green, CFX

The Sept. 8, 1909, two-line entry in the House Journal of the Holy Child Sisters in Melrose mentions that the pastor offered Mass that morning for the St. Mary's School community, after which teachers and students proceeded to the school to begin classes. The journalist's brevity models the Sisters' motto of "Actions not words" as it begins the story of 100 years of quality Catholic education for the children of Melrose (and beyond). In a significant way, the story begins in the Holy Land in the first century, but a more proximate event occurred 25 years before that September day in 1909.

In 1884, the Catholic bishops of the United States gathered in Baltimore for a meeting that has become known as the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore. Responding to the needs of a growing Catholic population, the bishops saw the "absolute necessity" of a parochial school for every American parish. Ten years later, St. Mary of the Annunciation Parish was formally established in Melrose to succeed the 20-year-old Church of St. Bridget. St. Mary's parishioners and the first pastor, the Rev. Francis J. Glynn, were able to burn the church mortgage in about a dozen years, and Father Glynn immediately began efforts to fulfill the obligation given to pastors to establish a parochial school.

The Archdiocese of Boston was already the home of a number of religious orders of women conducting excellent schools, but Father Glynn's advisors sent him to Pennsylvania to meet with representatives of a highly esteemed teaching community. In a suburb of Philadelphia, he met with the Provincial Superior of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and persuaded her to add St. Mary's School to the Society's international list of educational ministries. Melrose became the only Holy Child foundation ever made in New England. Father Glynn often expressed his pride in being able to provide St. Mary's students with such a highly qualified and dedicated community of religious educators.

The Holy Child Sisters appointed Rev. Mother Mary Marcella, SHCJ, as the first principal of St. Mary's School. She and the founding community of Mother St. Anthony, Mother Mary Angela, Mother Mary Xavier, Mother St. Bernard, and Sister Joseph Anne arrived at Boston's South Station on Aug. 14, 1909, and were met by the pastor's brother, James Glynn, who had leased two carriages to take them to North Station and then catch the 4:32 p.m. train to Melrose. The House Journal mentions that Miss Alice McNally and Miss Mabel Farnum accompanied the Sisters from Wyoming Station to their new home on Herbert Street. A delighted Father Glynn and his sister, Mary, greeted them at their new home and provided the travelers with a meal, opportunity for prayer, and then tours of the church and school.

## St. Mary's grows through the years

The Myrtle Street school building originally had four classrooms on each of the first and second floors, with an assembly hall for 450 and small stage on the third floor. The Aug. 27, 1909 edition of the *Melrose Free Press* described the building — with the "comforts of school life"

that “could hardly be excelled” — and wrote of the “teaching corps” as “ladies of the highest education” from whom “fine results may be expected.” Registrations were conducted from Sept. 1-3 by Mother Mary Marcella and her staff, with 252 girls and boys registered for grades one through six.

On Sept. 8, 1909, St. Mary’s Foundation Day, was of course only the first of nearly 20,000 school days on which the “business” of Catholic education occurred in the dynamics between and among teachers and students. There are as many “histories” of St. Mary’s School as there are people — students, teachers, staff members, parents — who are able to reflect on their own experiences there.

Besides the unannounced (but encouraging) visit by Cardinal William O’Connell, Archbishop of Boston, a mere two weeks after classes began, a list of some of the more “notable” events from the history of St. Mary’s School might include the following:

- By 1910, teachers are already beginning “professional development” with local programs for staff on Saturdays and at summer schools.
- June 24, 1913: Twenty-three boys and girls become the first graduating class of St. Mary’s School at an impressive ceremony. This tradition continues!
- In 1913, secondary school courses are offered for girls on the third floor. Over the years, classes move from there to Convent Hall on Herbert Street and then to the high school building at 42 Myrtle St., until its closing in 1970.
- Fall 1916: Principal Mother Mary Regis must delay the school’s opening until mid-October because of the danger from infantile paralysis (polio).
- April 1917: Mildred Keefe pronounces vows as the first of many Melrose women to enter the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. She becomes known as Mother Maria Rita, SHCJ.
- March 3, 1919: Melrose physicians Dr. Fay and Dr. O’Donnell come to the aid of fifth graders affected by the scarlet fever epidemic.
- In 1927, a stone, English Tudor style residence is built on the corner of Herbert and Myrtle Streets, allaying considerable crowding in the original building, then renamed Convent Hall. A wing is added to the Holy Child Convent in 1953. The building now serves as the Parish Center.
- Feb. 1, 1936: Pastor Rev. Joseph Bonner and Principal Rev. Mother Mary Alice establish the school’s Parent-Teacher Association.
- In 1947, a two-story wing is added to the school building, containing four classrooms, offices and cafeteria.
- In 1958, the parish of the Incarnation is founded on Upham Street. St. Mary’s School continues to serve the needs of Melrose families.

- Mid-1960s: Maintenance of the 50-year-old building and salary needs for the expanding lay faculty require that tuition be charged for the first time
- September 1973: St. Mary's Kindergarten is established in the basement of the "new wing" of the Convent.
- In 1982, the Holy Child Sisters cannot continue to provide staff for the school. Parishioners and Sisters mourn their departure.
- Sept. 5, 1985: Mary (Greelish) Foley, a Melrose Police School Traffic supervisor, is killed by an out-of-control car at the corner of Grove and Myrtle Streets, after pushing to safety a number of St. Mary's children caught in the crosswalk. Mrs. Foley was a St. Mary's graduate and the mother and grandmother of St. Mary's alumni.
- In 1989, Ms. Helen Blinstrub becomes St. Mary's first lay principal. She will serve until 2007.

### **A school ready for the 21st century and beyond**

Over the course of the century, many things have changed in the world and, specifically, at St. Mary's School. Students are no longer taught by Holy Child Sisters wearing traditional habits, but by a staff of dedicated lay professionals. Chalk and blackboard teaching has been replaced by white boards that are "smart." Family and Church relationships are no longer as simple as they once appeared to be, and everyone has had experiences of the world feeling somewhat smaller and, perhaps, less friendly. However, the essentials of a St. Mary's School education have not changed.

On Myrtle and Herbert Streets, well-trained and dedicated teachers continue to challenge young people to identify the unique talents that God has given them, and then to develop and use them so that our world, the world of the 21st century, may become better than it was in 1909. With the teachings and example of Jesus of Nazareth, first clarified by the Sisters who founded the school, students at St. Mary's School are putting into practice the Holy Child motto of "Actions not words" as they prepare themselves to become intelligent, creative, caring and faithful members of a world community that is in desperate need of their gifts.

Mother Mary Marcella and her Sisters in 1909 had no idea of the impact that St. Mary's School would have on its students during the first hundred years. Principal Mrs. Cynthia Boyle and her present staff can only dream of how, with God's help and guidance, their efforts are contributing to the lives of today's and tomorrow's students and their world.

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