History of St. Pius Catholic School

1921-2017

St. Pius V Catholic School has a rich history spanning more than 140 years. The history of the school intertwines with the early history of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Florida.

Bishop Augustin Verot went to his hometown in LePuy, France, to the Sisters of St. Joseph, to recruit sisters to come to Florida to teach the children of the newly-freed Blacks. The Bishop had a special ministry to the Blacks and after the war he was determined to educate their children, even though they had no money to pay for schooling. In 1866, eight sisters came to St. Augustine to teach and to care for the Blacks in the Diocese of Savannah and the Vicariate of Florida.

In January of 1867, the sisters opened a school for Blacks in St. Augustine and by 1870, a school was opened in Jacksonville. On October 12. 1903. the sisters opened St. Catherine's School, a small one-room building located next to Immaculate Conception Church on Church Street. The school was called St. Catherine's School in honor of Mother Katharine Drexell, who donated funds to build the school. In 1905, the sisters had to find another building in which to teach the children and by 1909 they were obliged to turn away 40 children because of lack of space.

Early in 1919, a site was purchased by Bishop Michael Curley for $12,000.00 (half a city block at West State and Lee Streets). The Bishop, who was ever solicitous for the welfare of the Blacks of the Diocese of St. Augustine, had contacted the Josephite Fathers, who were specialists in this work and the Superior General of the order assigned Father Michael Gumbleton, SSJ, to start a new parish here. When plans were being drawn for building St. Pius Church, the first parishioners saw the need for education for their youth, so a church-school was built. On February 27, 1921, the Church-school building was dedicated in downtown Jacksonville by Bishop Curley and in May of 1921 the Sisters of St. Joseph and their students moved into St. Pius V Catholic School. The school was staffed by three Sisters of St. Joseph and two lay teachers.

In the late 1950's, the area around State and Lee Streets began to deteriorate and so did the church-school building. When the building was declared unsafe and beyond repair, a large tract of land (4 1/2 acres) was purchased on Blue Avenue between 11th and 13th Streets. The men and women of the next generation of St. Pius V Parish, wishing to continue providing a good Catholic school for their children, again sacrificed having a church and instead erected a two story building. The first floor was to serve as the church and the second floor, having six classrooms, was to be the school. An administration building containing the office area, one classroom, and a library were built at the same time. The buildings were dedicated by Archbishop Joseph Hurley on October 23, 1961. In 1969, a classroom was added to the west end of the school building raising the number of classrooms to eight.

On Sunday, November 1, 1981, the third church of St. Pius V was dedicated in the presence of Bishop John Snyder, Bishop of St. Augustine. The building of the new edifice allowed the parish and school to enjoy not only a spacious hall, but also additional room in the school for a kindergarten and conference room. In 1984, a classroom was added next to the administration building. The addition of this classroom allowed the expansion of the library and provided the school with a combination audio visual/computer room. In 1993, a two-classroom building was erected to house pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes.

In 1993, the Josephite Fathers, facing declining numbers and aging priests, requested Bishop John Snyder to assign a diocesan priest as pastor. In June of 1994, Rev. James R. Boddie, Jr., himself a graduate of St. Pius V School, became pastor of St. Pius V Church and School.

In early 1995, the Diocesan Board of Education formed a committee to address the needs of the core city Catholic schools. From this came the Guardian of Dreams Foundation, a group of business women, men, and community leaders who saw the value of Jacksonville's core city Catholic schools (Holy Rosary and St. Pius) and who have committed time, talent, and resources to allow the two schools to continue their ministry of education.

In August of 2006, a new chapter in the school's history began when the Guardian of Dreams, with the approval of Bishop Victor Galeone, formed the Guardian Alliance of Catholic Schools (now Guardian Catholic Schools) and St. Pius School (along with Holy Rosary) became a diocesan school. Through the support of the “Guardian," St. Pius School has flourished.

In August of 2008, through the efforts of the Guardian Catholic Schools, four classrooms were added to the campus, which allowed the school to add a Pre-K3 classroom, expand the library, and have a science lab. Teachers, after 90 years, had a dedicated faculty room and Title I classes met in  a classroom instead of a trailer.

Until its merger with Holy Rosary Catholic School in 2017, the school was staffed by two Sisters of St. Joseph, two Sisters of Notre Dame (Toledo), thirteen lay teachers, a secretary, a business manager and an accountant. St. Pius V School also had the services of a school nurse and a band teacher one day per week, and a guidance counselor 1.5 days a week. With a part-time lunch staff, students had access to one full hot meal a week and pizza, chicken, hot dogs, and hamburgers were offered other days. Salad and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were  available every day. The extended day program was staffed by six people from at 2:45 to 6 p.m. The maintenance staff consisted of two workers, one full-time and one part-time, who took care of repairs, upkeep, and the cleaning of the school.

St. Pius V Church and School resulted from a growing need of the Black Community of Jacksonville. The parish is unique in that it is a "personal parish." It was created to serve the Black Community of Jacksonville and not simply a territory. St. Pius is still "personal” and parishioners commute from all over the city to attend Mass.