History of Holy Rosary Catholic School

1958-2017

Holy Rosary Catholic School opened in 1958. It is with pride and gratitude that we look back to our early history and trace the workings of God's providence in the people and events that have shaped who we are today.

Because Holy Rosary is a Catholic School that began as a parish school, the early history of Holy Rosary School and Church are integrally related.  Holy Rosary Church is the fifth oldest parish in Jacksonville.  It began as a simple mission chapel erected in 1915 to care for the Catholics in the Springfield area. In October 1921 Holy Rosary became an independent parish and its newly appointed pastor, Fr. Dennis Lyons, initiated plans for a new church to be built on the corner of Laura and Cottage Streets.

Continued growth of the parish during the next 30 years culminated in 1952 with the initial efforts to establish a parish school.  Although property for the school was acquired at Brentwood and 41st Streets, the building campaign got off to a slow start.  Catholic students in the area were then served by St. Joseph Academy, which was located about two miles from Holy Rosary Parish.  In 1955 St. Joseph Academy was closed and students from that school were transferred to Immaculate Conception School, a nearby downtown parish school.  This move by St. Joseph Academy gave renewed impetus to the building fund for Holy Rosary School.  The parishioners of Holy Rosary Church increased their efforts, and in 1958 Holy Rosary School was completed.

On May 26, 1957 the groundbreaking ceremony was held, and Holy Rosary School opened in September 1958 with an enrollment of 344 children.  The initial teaching staff included four Sisters of St. Joseph with Sr. Mary Paul as principal.  In its beginning years, Holy Rosary served an entirely Caucasian student body most of whom were Catholics and members of the parish.  One expression of the strong ties between the parish church and school was an active Parents’ Auxiliary that served the school in a wide variety of volunteer capacities.  In addition to a strong basic academic program, students were actively involved in science fairs, oratorical contests, music and art fairs, and team sports.  Class sizes averaged 30-35 in its peak years.

The Sisters of St. Joseph left Holy Rosary at the end of the school year in June 1966.  Ms. Jennie Pohorence succeeded Sr. Mary Eucharia, S.S.J. as principal until September 1967 when four Sisters of Notre Dame of Toledo, Ohio arrived and Sr. Mary Venard, S.N.D. assumed leadership of the school.  In time Notre Dame Sisters Mary Elmer, Mary Berna, Mary Bryan, Elaine Marie Clement, Barbara Marie Sloan, Audrey Marie Elfring, Patricia Marie McClain, Sr. Mary Dianne Rumschlag, S.N.D and Sr. Cynthia Shaffer, SND succeeded her as principal. The school was first accredited in 1984.  Sr. Mary Dianne Rumschlag, S.N.D worked closely with the former pastor, Fr. Mike Koncik, C.Ss.R. and a team of dedicated teachers to ensure the quality Catholic education that has always characterized Holy Rosary School.

In June 2005 the Redemptorist priests were no longer able to staff Holy Rosary, ending 45 years of ministry in the church and school.  Their contribution has been significant over the years; then we entered a new period of leadership by diocesan priests.  Father Jason Trull was appointed pastor in June 2005.  He was the first diocesan priest at Holy Rosary since 1959.  Father Callistus Onwere succeeded Fr. Trull followed by Fr. Michael Houle who became the Parish Administrator of Holy Rosary Church.  At the same time that the Redemptorists left, the Sisters of Notre Dame were able to increase their presence at Holy Rosary from three sisters to five.  Educational ministry in urban settings is a priority for the Sisters of Notre Dame.  From 1997 Sr. Beverly DiStefano, OP, a Sinsinawa Dominican, has been part of the school teaching staff and represents her community’s commitment to urban education.

In 1959 many parishioners were reassigned to a new Northside parish, St. Patrick.  At the same time a major industry moved to Mississippi necessitating that some families from the parish move with the jobs.  Both events resulted in a significant decline in Holy Rosary’s Church and school membership. The supporters of the Church and school experienced economic hard times.  Major department stores began to vacate the once flourishing mall located across from the school and, in time, the demographics of the neighborhood changed significantly.  The school was located in a working class low-income neighborhood. The students were predominately African-American and non-Catholic.  Holy Rosary was located in the 32206 zip code area which has the lowest 1% of family median income in both the United States and the State of Florida.  This school was located among the poorest neighborhoods in the U.S. and Florida.

Changes in the neighborhood were reflected in the school population.  In the spring of 1996, just thirty-eight years after it had opened, Holy Rosary Catholic School was faced with the possibility of closing because of excessive dependence on financial resources outside the school and a steady decrease in enrollment.  The school lacked an active Home and School Association and School Advisory Council, indicative of waning parental involvement in the school.  All of these factors contributed to an outpouring of local support for Holy Rosary School and the gathering of human resources to secure its future.  It was clear that no single group working alone could accomplish that task.

A Task Force was formed and mandated to study the situation and make recommendations regarding the school’s future.  The Sisters of Notre Dame, who provided administrative personnel for the school, were advised of the immediate need to exercise creative leadership in enhancing the school’s viability.  The Guardian of Dreams, a partnership formed in 1995 by local business men and women, increased its efforts to establish an operational and an endowment fund to support the educational mission of Holy Rosary and St. Pius V Catholic Schools located in economically disadvantaged areas on the city’s north side.  Additionally, as of the 2000-2001 school year, Holy Rosary became eligible to participate in the H.E.R.O.E.S. scholarship program which provides scholarship funding for economically disadvantaged children in Florida.  The Corporate Income Tax scholarship funding continues today under the name Step Up for Students.

At the beginning of the 1996-97 school year, Holy Rosary Catholic School served 155 students in pre-Kindergarten through grade 8.  Efforts to increase enrollment were a high priority since the school was operating at only 62% of its 250 capacity.  By the spring of 1998, enrollment had dropped to 132.  However, the 1998-99 school year opened with an enrollment of 170 and the school was at 68% of its capacity.  Holy Rosary is typical of other inner-city Catholic schools in the trend toward serving a minority population which is increasingly non-Catholic.  However, Holy Rosary’s 100% minority population and 90% non-Catholic enrollment in 1997-98 was higher than the national trend.

In March 2004 the Board of the Guardian Catholic Schools launched a $2.5 million Early Childhood Excellence campaign for both Holy Rosary and St. Pius V Schools.  On April 6, 2005 Bishop Victor Galeone officiated at the Blessing and Groundbreaking ceremony for Holy Rosary’s Early Childhood Education building.  It was dedicated on April 24, 2007 and was in full use for the 2007-2008 school year.  The six-room building housed PK3, PK4, kindergarten, a reading center, computer lab and a multi-purpose room.  The school library was moved from the school office to the former kindergarten building.  The former library was renovated into much-needed office space. Repairs and improvements were made to the cafeteria and parish hall, including a new roof.

The mission of Holy Rosary Catholic School was to provide a quality Catholic educational environment in which all members of the school community could pursue success in education and in life by strengthening minds, bodies and spirits to help build a holy and just society.

 The school assumed an important role of evangelization as it served children and families of widely diverse religious backgrounds.  The people of Holy Rosary, along with the former leadership of the Redemptorists and the  leadership of diocesan priests, the Sisters of Notre Dame, and the Sinsinawa Dominicans viewed the parish and school as expressions of the Church’s commitment to be a stable and faith-filled presence in this Northside community.

Scripture reminds us that without a vision, the people perish.  Holy Rosary Catholic School’s vision was to be a model school and Catholic presence in Northside Jacksonville:  espousing a philosophy centered in Christian values; preparing its students for high school and beyond through excellence in academics and Faculty/Staff; and physically designed to meet student and community needs.

The people of Holy Rosary Church and School thank God for the manifold blessings that have sustained them during the school’s history.  Together parishioners and school families move into the future – proclaiming the Gospel of life and hope.