



## Holy Child Jesus School ... the first 100 years

In September 2017, Holy Child Jesus Catholic School, now Academy, will be celebrating an impressive achievement as it marks its 100th anniversary. This date has special significance for the alumni who attended this school. The residents of Richmond Hill, not only our Catholic parishioners, also have reason to celebrate if we consider the thousands of neighborhood children who have been educated and benefitted from the numerous religious, social and civic activities that the school has provided for the betterment of the entire community, young and old.

In 2010, H.C.J. parish celebrated its Centennial. Several events recalled the early founding of a new parish in north Richmond Hill, an area bordering beautiful Forest Park. Previously, the land that now comprises our parish of H.C.J. belonged to our neighbors at St. Benedict Joseph Labre Parish, located on 118 St. just south of Atlantic Ave. But as new homes were being constructed further north, Bishop Charles E. McDonnell assigned a priest named Fr. Thomas Nummey to find a suitable site to “establish a new parish to serve the spiritual interests of the Catholic people on the hill”. He purchased a tract of land on 86 Ave. between 111 and 112 St. The property included a large home which served as the parish office/ headquarters for 20 years. It became the residence for the priests, the center where all business was conducted and the sacred place where daily mass was celebrated. Sunday masses were held on the 2nd floor of a bank on Jamaica Ave. but that proved to be unacceptable to the parishioners. So, within one short year, in 1911, the “basement-church” was built, the very same structure which is the present day auditorium/gym that has served as the multi-purpose facility for thousands of functions over this past century.

The big, spacious houses of Richmond Hill attracted and accommodated large, multi-generational families and the parish rapidly grew from 100 to 500 families in 6 years. Fr. Thomas Nummey observed that his parishioners were from various European backgrounds (Irish, German, Lithuanian, Italian, Polish and Czech). They were neighbors. They attended mass every Sunday. They supported their new parish but they had little interaction on a parish level and so he proposed a very progressive idea to the Diocese. He petitioned to build an elementary school before undertaking the huge project of constructing a proper church. Father realized that a parish school would bring the children together for many hours every week day and then their



parents would start to interact as well. Gradually, as families began to know each other, friendships would develop, differences would diminish, bonds would strengthen and hopefully some lasting relationships would even result in good marriages once the parish became the focal point of the neighborhood. Fr. Nummey was committed to 3 goals: first, to provide the children with a solid, Catholic formation instilling in them a strong moral compass: second, to include a rigorous academic curriculum preparing them for the future and third, to form them into patriotic, American citizens which would enhance their ability to achieve, flourish and prosper. He believed these children would become rooted in their parish, committed to their faith and in time they would help to build a permanent church.

Fortunately for the children of HCJ, a brick, two-story, fire proof, state of the arts school was constructed for \$65,000 and on September 17, 1917 the school doors opened with an enrollment of 132 students. They were welcomed and educated by Sister Cora, the first Principal, and 4 other Sisters of Saint Joseph who all resided in one of the classrooms on the top floor. With an eye on the future, and the possibility of an ever increasing population, the building was constructed having the capability to support a third floor which by 1939 did become a reality when 6 more classrooms were added.

Prayer, long term planning and good judgement brought success and eventually a large church and rectory were designed, financed and completed by 1931. The bells rang out from the impressive brick tower on Christmas Eve when the first mass was celebrated to commemorate the name given to our parish. Parishioners had faithfully pledged and raised \$75,000 in the midst of "The Great Depression" confirming their sacrifice and commitment which brought honor to all when HCJ received the **First Prize Award** by the Chamber of Commerce of Queens "for excellence in design and civic value of this building".

Now, with a permanent school and church in place, more religious sodalities and social groups were organized for the children. In addition to the altar boys and children's choir, Halloween parties, Christmas pageants, plays, tournaments, recitals and award ceremonies all became part of the fabric of HCJ. The Catholic Youth



Organization (CYO), a Diocesan athletic program, was enthusiastically embraced by the kids wanting to play sports and the adults who volunteered to coach them. Scout troops for boys and girls were organized and still exist today. The Catholic children of the parish who attended the public schools in the neighborhood came for a weekly religious instructional program called the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) to prepare for Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. The school building became the destination where these activities could assemble day and night, 7 days a week, all year long.

The adult population of the parish also utilized the school building for various activities. The classrooms, cafeteria and gym/auditorium provided ample space for committees to meet as they convened to prepare for annual fund raisers, religious liturgies, seasonal dances, bazaars, guest speakers, civic events, parent-teacher meetings, Parish Council, calendar meetings, awards dinners and occasional galas to congratulate or honor our own newly ordained clergy or religious or to say farewell to those transferred to minister in other parishes.

After the end of World War II in 1945, soldiers and sailors came home from the battlefields and civilian life eventually returned to normal in post-war America. Families continued to move into Richmond Hill adding to the population. A new term, BABY BOOMERS, became part of the English language which defined the demographic group of children who created the explosion in the birth rate beginning in 1946. Five years later, Kindergarten classes saw unprecedented enrollments and class sizes of 50 plus students was not unusual at HCF as well as every other school throughout the USA and in our own Brooklyn/Queens Diocese.

Fortunately, we always had a continuous group of Josephite nuns assigned to instruct our many children but they also needed more living space and so in 1952 a small home was replaced by a large convent which was erected on the corner of the property. Besides being a residence for over 20 nuns, the convent was the place where every weekday at 3 PM, selected students carried each Sister's large, black leather book bag filled with endless test papers and daily homework assignment needing to be corrected. Students also went there for dreaded detention after school, took piano lessons in the basement or were measured for angel wings and costumes for All Saints



Day, Christmas pageants or Mission Sunday. Today the convent is now known as the Leonard Center (LC) and it serves as the busy main office, meeting center and business cite for the parish but the quiet chapel still reminds us of the days gone by when the nuns gathered here every morning and evening for prayer.

Overcrowding became a huge problem in the upper grades where obviously the desks were larger and the classrooms could not accommodate the furniture necessary for the increased BABY BOOMER enrollment. For a short time at HCJ, the good Sisters held split sessions with one group of students in attendance from 8:00 -12:30 PM and after a quick lunch in their convent, the Sisters returned to school and taught a second group of students who would come from 1-5 PM. Sessions rotated periodically and some students went to the convent on Saturdays for extra help. How everyone managed to adjust and successfully cover the curriculum remains a miracle but the dedication, perseverance and endurance of the Sisters was remarkable.

The pastor at that time, Msgr. William Murray, realized that this was unacceptable. He began a project to add a “new wing” which was to be constructed over the existing basement- church and completed by 1968. He proposed that the parish would provide the \$1,000,000 to construct the building but all the furnishings and other necessities must be provided by the parishioners, parents, alumni and benefactors in order to make this huge endeavor a reality. The new construction provided 8 modern classrooms, bathrooms, a nurse’s office and a small faculty room to accommodate the unprecedented changes which sadly had begun as fewer women were becoming nuns and faculties were now also comprised of Catholic lay men and women. A master list was compiled consisting of various items needed to outfit the new wing making it ready to redistribute the 24 classes of students from grades 1-8. Only after every item was claimed did the proposal become finalized and the people pledged immediately to purchase items as their means would allow. Everything from bibles, wall clocks, crucifixes, cleaning supplies, desks, dictionaries, flags, globes, maps, paper products, pointers, window shades, statues, textbooks, waste paper baskets and window poles were claimed by school families and parishioners eager for the new extension to be constructed. Today, a huge metallic plaque is affixed to the wall of the staircase landing leading into the gym. It is a visible testimony, a permanent reminder, to acknowledge all those who contributed to this ambitious project proving once again that the



parishioners, young and old, always responded when there was a noble undertaking needing to be financed.

But while some things remain constant at HCJ, some things have also changed and these changes have greatly impacted our parish school. Only a very few nuns are still on staff in the Diocese and we no longer have the Sisters of Saint Joseph serving as our principals, administrators or teachers. Dedicated lay men and women now fill these positions; tuition is a necessity and gone are the days when these roles were performed without pay thanks to the vocations of those called to do this work. The large families with many children are rare and this decreased population has also resulted in far fewer schools in our Diocese. Demographics have changed in Richmond Hill and these days, non-Catholics and children from other parishes and neighborhoods are occupying the desks which formerly were reserved only for the children registered within our designated parish boundaries because space was so limited. Early Morning Drop Off, free breakfast and After School Programs now offer assistance to our families. Busy, modern lifestyles make it harder to enlist responsible adult volunteers needed to supervise the children as they participate in various activities such as class trips, school dances, teams, clubs, etc. throughout their school years at HCJ. A new government program entitled Pre-K for All sponsored and funded by the NYC Department of Education rents classroom space in many of our Catholic schools. HCJCA now has 4 classes of local 4 year old children who follow a public school calendar and curriculum while attending school along with our students.

Security issues, city regulations, NY state testing, mandated certifications, single parent families, ever-changing technology, new curriculum requirements, medical compliancy and continuous upgrades and maintenance in old buildings like HCJ are some of the issues that are always expensive, problematic and time consuming. However, they must never take priority over the main goal of educating all the youngsters entrusted to us from Pre K to 8th grade.

Fortunately, when good things withstand the test of time, we can celebrate milestones and anniversaries. Over 100 years ago, our parish was established and the elementary school that was part of the major plan has been able to persevere despite all the challenges of the past century. Many factors, especially the work of dedicated





people, plus a bit of luck, contributed to the survival and excellence of our Catholic elementary school where sadly so many others have had to close.

We are now **HCJ Catholic Academy** as of 2014, a huge transition for our parish. In September 2008, under the leadership of Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, the Diocese took the first steps towards Preserving the Vision, a planning process for our Catholic Elementary Schools. This new Academy model is the future for Catholic education throughout Brooklyn and Queens. It requires that by 2017 all our elementary schools be able to function independently without any financial assistance from their parish. This new policy resulted in a few name changes, some school closures, several mergers, and the implementation of the new two-tiered governance model comprised of Diocesan and Parish Clergy Members and a volunteer Board of Directors who govern the Academy, write policy for the efficient operation of the Academy and assist the Principals in those schools that were able to meet and comply with the new guidelines. As an Academy, we will continue to build upon the successes we have had and will continue to provide the best in Catholic education.

The 3 goals that were the motivating factors to build a new school 100 years ago are still applicable today. The children and community of Richmond Hill have greatly benefitted from the services provided by our parish school not financed through taxpayer dollars but rather provided because of the continuous dedication, devotion and love of neighbor. No one could have ever accurately predicted all the twists and turns over the last 100 years but we always could rely upon our faith, families and friends. The bold new venture, envisioned over 100 years ago was developed by ambitious leadership, grateful parishioners, generous benefactors and thousands of volunteers who strived to achieve lofty goals. It created a formula for success. How blessed we are to be the recipients today! Let us all be mindful to pay it forward for all those still to come to the neighborhood of Richmond Hill and this wonderful parish of Holy Child Jesus.

Maria L. Palminteri Turner Class of 1958