

REMEMBERING THINGS PAST: THE FIRST SCHOOLS IN DULUTH

By † Sister Margaret Clarke *

Part 1: The First Schools

From their earliest existence, the Benedictine Sisters of Duluth engaged in two major ministries in their early days: teaching in parish schools and running hospitals. The first of each of these ministries to be accepted occurred even before the establishment of the independent Duluth community, while Mother Scholastica Kerst was prioress of St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota. We have chosen five of the early schools to highlight, all but one founded before the independent community. In this article we will concentrate on the first of these schools and in Part 2 (Fall *Pathways*) will continue with four more early parish schools staffed by our Sisters.

St. Thomas/Cathedral/Sacred Heart School; 1881; 1884-1970

On December 15, 1880, Mother Scholastica Kerst, in her first year as Prioress at St. Benedict's, came to Duluth at the invitation of Bishop Rupert Seidenbusch, OSB, Vicar Apostolic of Northern Minnesota. She arrived by train, accompanied by a "little orphan girl." I had always wondered about the tradition of traveling with orphans until I read an account which noted that children traveled free by railway, an economical and convenient way to meet the requirement that Sisters always have a companion while in public. Sacred Heart Parish provided a dilapidated livery barn and promised to have it renovated by the time school would start in January. On January 6, Mother Scholastica returned with three Sisters who would be the teachers. The Sisters were housed in the home of parishioners for six weeks, beginning classes for 150 pupils on January 15. The primary drawback was the state of the building—during a cold winter, snow and wind came through all the cracks. On June 29, at the close of the academic year, the announcement was made that the school would be closed until a more suitable building could be provided, and the Sisters returned to St. Benedict's.

In 1884 a new start was attempted in a frame building on East 3rd Street and a rented convent on 2nd Avenue West and 4th Street. Children came, generally on foot, from all over the city. Fr. Joseph Cashen noted: "Some of the children lived on Minnesota Point and crossed the canal on the ice or in a boat. In the severe weather they stopped at Poirier's store halfway between their homes and the school (well over a half mile for those living on the Point) and Mrs. Poirier unwound the scarves and set the little ones behind the stove." In 1885 the parish purchased the lots occupied by the convent and built a new school and renovated an existing house for a convent. The school was named for St. Thomas Aquinas.

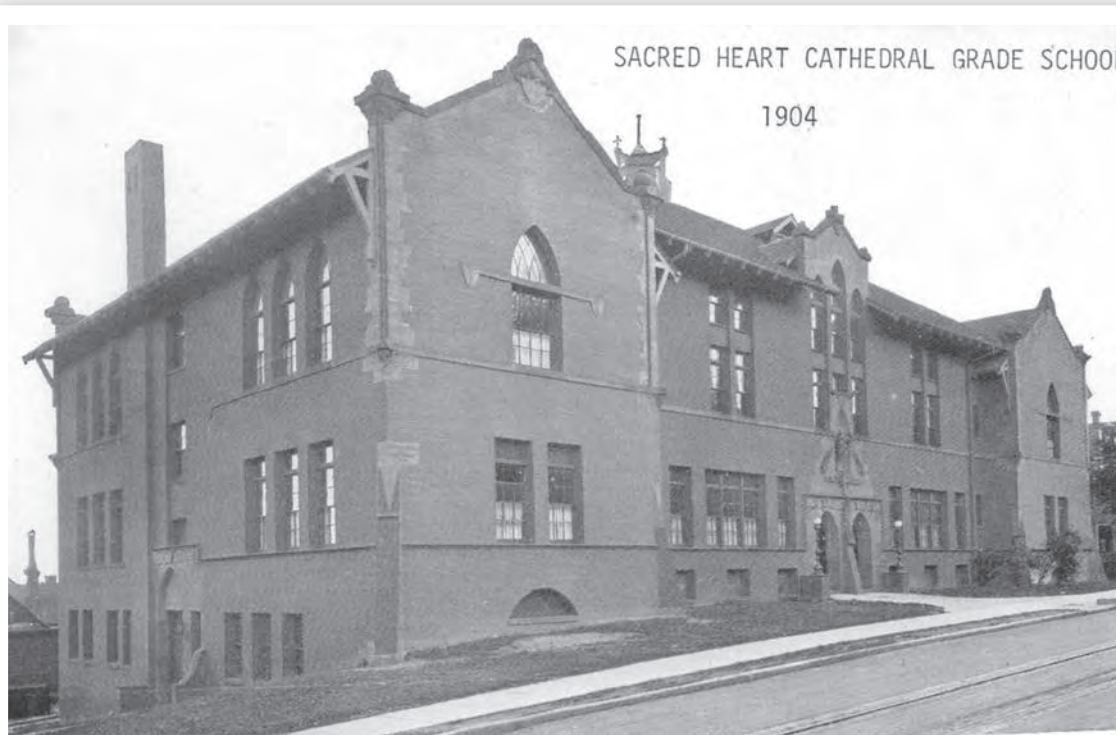


Students and teachers in front of St. Thomas School, 1897



St. Thomas School (left) and parish hall

At this time, the school became the first to pay salaries for its teachers: \$20 a month for teachers and \$25 for the principal. This became the norm for all parish school teachers for the next 30 years (until Mother Chrysostom Doran demanded an increase in order to help the Community out of debt.) The two-story frame building could accommodate 350 students in its 10 classrooms. In 1902, after the establishment of the Diocese of Duluth, when Sacred Heart Church became the Cathedral, the building was moved to lots adjacent to St. Mary's Hospital (roughly where the Emergency entrance is today) and a new school was built on the St. Thomas lot, across from the Cathedral, and renamed Cathedral School.



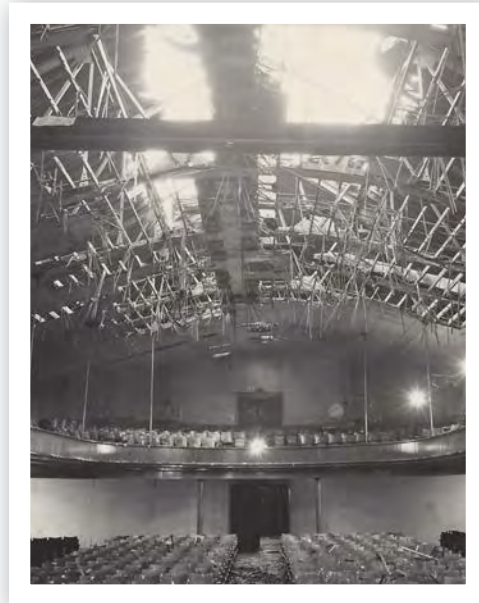
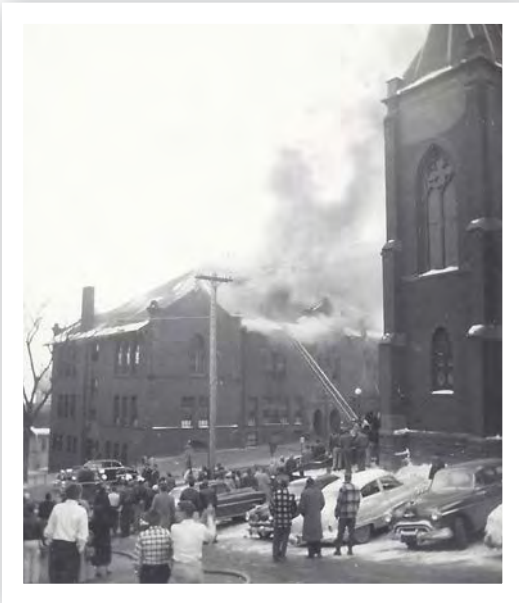
Cathedral Grade School, 1904

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The impressive new building, completed in 1904, had eleven classrooms, gyms, club rooms, offices and an auditorium seating 2000. The building still stands across from Sacred Heart Music Center, the former Cathedral, and now houses the Damiano Center. The façade of the building contains a bit of mystery: Above the doors is a statue of the Sacred Heart, and on the trumeau between the entrance doors, another statue of a shrouded figure. No one has any knowledge of whom this might represent. (Any information would be gratefully accepted!)

When Holy Rosary Cathedral was constructed in 1957 in eastern Duluth, the grade school was renamed “Sacred Heart School,” although the High School which had been built across the avenue remained “Cathedral High.” One notable event occurred in 1956, when a major fire gutted the top-floor auditorium. The students and faculty were well-prepared, and the entire building was evacuated within three minutes under the direction of principal Sister Mary Paul Ludwig.



Fire damage to school auditorium, 1956

The elementary school continued in existence with Sister faculty and administration until 1970. One Sister describes why it is so fondly remembered, noting that it was a small school where everyone knew everyone; poor in the things of this world—every little bit had to be earned—but with a Benedictine family spirit of everyone caring for all others. Students attended Cathedral by choice, not by coercion.

Intermission: Ethnic parishes and schools

In the late 19th century, a trend began in Northern Minnesota to create parishes made up of families of a single nationality, most of whom lived in a particular neighborhood. The first group to lobby the Vicar Apostolic in Duluth for such a parish was the Polish. In 1884 St. Mary Star of the Sea parish was created, and in 1885 a school, St. Stanislaus, was constructed and Polish-speaking Benedictine Sisters were assigned to teach there. About 150 children were moved from St. Thomas school, and classes were taught in Polish, English, and German. Other ethnic parishes in Duluth were eventually established: St. Anthony (German) and St. Jean Baptiste (French). This desire for ethnic parishes led to such curiosities as having two churches of differing ethnicity built on adjoining lots in Virginia, Minnesota. The Benedictine Sisters withdrew from St. Stanislaus in 1913, when the Franciscans took over.

*** Sister Margaret Clarke died April 29, 2014, just after completing this two-part article. The second part will be in the fall Pathways. Sister Margaret's obituary is online at www.DuluthBenedictines.org and will appear in the fall Pathways.**

Photos from Monastery Archives