

HISTORY OF ALTOONA CATHOLIC/BISHOP GUILFOYLE HIGH SCHOOL

On January 15, 1922, the Most Reverend John J. McCort, D.D., Bishop of Altoona, announced to an assembly in the Young Men's Institute hall the plan for erection of a Catholic high school in the city of Altoona. The purpose of his undertaking is contained in a sentence taken from his address that evening: "I pledge this school to God as a proof of my solicitude for the young." Within a week, a campaign to solicit funds for the project was under way. It met with an enthusiastic response from the generous Catholic families in the Altoona community. Within a two-week period, the pledges and subscriptions were sufficient to permit the Bishop to begin work on the construction plans.

In April 1922 Bishop McCort presided over groundbreaking ceremonies at 1100 Sixth Avenue, the home of Altoona Catholic High School. On Tuesday, September 5, 198 students from the various city parochial schools met at Saint John School (Cathedral School) to register. Two days later, the students reassembled and received an appointment to one of five divisions. Since the new school was still under construction, classes for the first freshman class of Altoona Catholic began at five different parish school halls across the city: Cathedral, Sacred Heart, Immaculate Conception (Saint Mary), Saint Mark, and Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Each of the five divisions was placed under the supervision of a Sister of the religious order staffing each parish school. The first faculty of Altoona Catholic High School included members of the Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of Saint Agnes, Sisters of Saint Joseph, and Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Bishop McCort appointed the Reverend Monsignor Patrick D. Harkins as first principal of the new high school, a position he was to hold for the first 29 years of the school's history.

On Monday morning, February 5, 1923, all five divisions of the newly formed school were admitted to the new high school building. The first freshman class completed their year assembled together on June 15, 1923. The following fall, 160 freshmen were admitted. A new group of freshmen arrived each year until finally, in September 1925, Altoona Catholic High School was a complete four-year high school. In March 1926, Dr. James G. Pentz, director of the Credential Bureau, Department of Public Institution, Harrisburg, officially visited and inspected the school, and on May 28 of that year sent Monsignor Harkins a letter stating, "Please be advised that your high school will be placed on the list of accredited four-year high schools." On June 9, 1926, the first commencement exercises were conducted in the Mishler Theater. Seventy-nine seniors received their diplomas from Bishop McCort and became the first alumni of Altoona Catholic High School.

The enrollment of the school continued to climb until 1941, when war called many students and alumni into military service. During the early years of the school, interest in athletics was aroused and encouraged by the formation of track, football, and basketball teams whose successful exploits merited several trophies. The artistic abilities of the students were displayed through the formation of the school orchestra and dramatic productions. Literary efforts of the talented Altoona Catholic High students developed in the school newspaper, *The Purple and Gold*.

On January 30, 1951, Monsignor Harkins was appointed pastor of Saint Matthew Church in Tyrone. His new appointment brought to a close the first successful administration of Altoona Catholic High School. During his administration, Monsignor Harkins influenced the lives of some 3500 Catholic men and women.

On February 8, 1951, Bishop Richard T. Guilfoyle, who had been installed as the third bishop of the Altoona diocese in 1936, appointed the Reverend Vincent A. Luther principal of Altoona Catholic. During Father Luther's administration, the school enjoyed an unprecedented growth in enrollment. Admission to Altoona Catholic became extremely competitive. A rigorous testing program was implemented to screen prospective students for a "seat" in the high school. The selective admission criteria added a sense of academic prestige to Catholic secondary education in the Altoona community. Altoona Catholic's curriculum gained the attention and respect of the entire community.

In 1956, enrollment climbed to over 500. During that year, Monsignor Roy F. Kline was appointed assistant principal, a position he held for the next 12 years. The close of the 1956-1957 school year was marked by the unexpected death

of Bishop Richard T. Guilfoyle on June 10. Known for his love of children and his enthusiasm for sports, Bishop Guilfoyle supported the cause of Catholic education throughout the diocese.

On January 2, 1958, the Most Reverend Howard J. Carroll was consecrated Bishop of the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese. To provide the opportunity for a Catholic secondary education to more students throughout the diocesan schools, Bishop Carroll embarked on an extensive building campaign which included a completely new Catholic high school in Cambria County and a new building for Altoona Catholic in Altoona, where enrollment was now hovering around 600. Groundbreaking for the new building at the Pleasant Valley location occurred on September 1, 1959, with Bishop Carroll and Father Luther presiding over the ceremonies. The sudden death of Bishop Carroll on March 21, 1960, saddened the entire diocese.

One year after the groundbreaking, under the direction of Father Luther, juniors and seniors moved to the nearly completed Pleasant Valley complex, leaving the freshmen and sophomores at the Sixth Avenue building, administrated by Monsignor Roy F. Kline, assistant principal. On Sunday, April 16, 1961, the newly appointed (September 21, 1960) bishop, Most Reverend J. Carroll McCormick, presided over the Solemn Blessing of the “new” Altoona Catholic High School. At the dedication ceremonies, Bishop McCormick announced that the school would be known from that day forward as Bishop Guilfoyle High School in honor of Bishop Richard T. Guilfoyle. For the next 25 years, the school would continue to operate in two buildings: the Sixth Avenue building for freshmen and sophomores, and the Pleasant Valley building for juniors and seniors.

In 1963, failing health forced Father Luther to resign, and Bishop McCormick appointed Monsignor Francis E. Plummer as the third principal of the high school. During Monsignor Plummer’s tenure, enrollment continued to climb. The high school enjoyed some of the largest graduating classes it had ever known. In 1965, the faculty of Bishop Guilfoyle included 11 priests and 33 Sisters from 6 religious communities. In addition to the 5 original communities, the Sisters of Divine Providence had joined the faculty to provide guidance/counseling services and instruction in the new home economics laboratory.

On June 1, 1966, Bishop James J. Hogan was installed as the new Bishop of the Altoona-Johnstown Catholic Diocese, and in 1967 he appointed Monsignor Plummer as Director of Vocations for the diocese and Reverend Gerard J. Ream as fourth principal of the high school. During the first year of Father Ream’s tenure, Bishop Guilfoyle graduated the largest class in its history. The Class of 1968 included 255 students – 103 males and 152 females. Also during his principalship, the various departments of the school collaborated in presenting the first of several full-scale productions of popular musicals.

Monsignor Kline completed his twelfth year as assistant principal in 1968 and was appointed pastor of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus Parish in Altoona. Reverend James F. Skupien then became assistant principal for the Sixth Avenue building until his appointment in 1972 as the fifth principal of the high school. In that same year, Sister Mary Aquinas Tulus, CSFN, became the first woman religious appointed as assistant principal and served at the Sixth Avenue building until 1974. Her community, the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, was the seventh religious community to teach at Bishop Guilfoyle. In 1974, Reverend Daniel F. O’Friel was appointed administrator of the Sixth Avenue building.

Father Skupien’s tenure as principal spanned a 12-year period. He was instrumental in introducing long range plans to expand the Pleasant Valley building and once again unite a student body that had been geographically divided for some 24 years. Collaborating with Father Skupien in these plans and dreams were Father Daniel O’Friel, associate principal, and Monsignor Robert Mazur, who had become assistant principal in 1978. During Father Skupien’s term, the Christian Service program was established and has flourished to this day as an integral and respected part of the religion curriculum. Varsity sports for female students began with female teams in both basketball and volleyball. The Lady Marauders soon distinguished themselves and their school by winning the State Basketball Championship in 1984.

Upon Father O’Friel’s untimely death in 1981, Monsignor Robert C. Mazur was appointed by Bishop Hogan as administrator at Sixth Avenue and held that post until 1984 when he became the sixth principal of Altoona Catholic /

Bishop Guilfoyle High School. Monsignor Stanley B. Carson replaced Monsignor Mazur at the Sixth Avenue building for a year until he was appointed in 1985 as principal of Bishop Carroll High School in Ebensburg. At that time, Sister Beverly Hmel, IHM, the present associate principal, became the second woman religious to hold this position; her span of service bridged the transition from two buildings to one united student body.

The groundbreaking ceremony for the new addition to the Pleasant Valley facility finally occurred in September 1984. Construction began immediately, overseen each step of the way by Monsignor Mazur and Monsignor Paul D. Panza, vicar of the Diocese. Hammers and drills and dust became an accepted part of the curriculum as classes continued without interruption throughout the construction and the gradual relocation of furniture and school equipment.

Under Monsignor Mazur's leadership, the challenging task of combining and unifying what were essentially two separate schools was accomplished efficiently and quietly. On Sunday evening, December 1, 1985, all four classes reported to homerooms in the Pleasant Valley building for the first time and then proceeded to the auditorium for the Blessing and Dedication ceremony. Joined by parents, alumni, clergy, and dignitaries from the City of Altoona, Bishop James J. Hogan solemnly blessed the new addition.

The months of planning and coordination down to the smallest detail had produced a rich harvest: the 24-year dream became a reality. It remained only to put the finishing touches on the newly constructed and renovated building, a task that included setting up a marble statue of *The Teaching Christ*, dedicated in memory of Father Daniel O'Friel, in the courtyard at the very heart of the educational complex. Newly refurbished crucifixes from the original Catholic High building, portraits of the bishops of Altoona-Johnstown and former principals, and newly acquired religious art combined to proclaim visually the Catholic roots, values, and traditions of Altoona Catholic / Bishop Guilfoyle High School. In addition to these external signs, daily Advent and Lenten liturgies and special Masses for athletic and other extracurricular groups were added to the community liturgies and retreats already well established in the school. To commemorate the joining of the entire student body as one, and to maintain the historical connection with the original building at Sixth Avenue, Monsignor Robert Mazur commissioned a mural for the school depicting the history of the two buildings, and containing the actual cornerstone and cross from the Sixth Avenue building.

Right before the beginning of Monsignor Mazur's administration, for the first time in the history of the school, secondary lay teachers in the diocese organized and formed an Altoona-Johnstown Catholic School Teachers Association. The first contract between the Association and the Diocese was signed on August 27, 1984. The following years were ones of mutual adjustment as administration and faculty worked toward balance and cooperation.

The Alumni Scholarship Fund, begun by the Class of 1932 under the leadership of Bill Courtney and coordinated by Sister Cornelia O'Friel, SC, climbed steadily to over \$100,000 by 1989. An Alumni Office was established; mailings were organized; and at their reunions, classes heard from Monsignor Mazur of the great need for help if Catholic education were to remain available to all despite increased costs. The response was immediate and steady: grateful and generous alumni, treasuring their own Catholic education, have helped hundreds of students to benefit from that same gift.

The fine sports tradition of Altoona Catholic / Bishop Guilfoyle High School, which surged with the girls' basketball state championship in 1984, continued with great teams throughout this era. During the football season of 1987, the Marauders posted the first undefeated, untied, and uncontested record since the team of 1937 had walked off the gridiron a half-century earlier. Alumni from the 1937 class and football team attended the final home game with Hollidaysburg to encourage the winning Marauders and were feted at a special dinner with their coach, Norb Rascher.

In 1987, Bishop Guilfoyle High School, together with the entire Church of Altoona-Johnstown, welcomed Bishop Joseph V. Adamec as the seventh Bishop of the Diocese. The high school was the site for Bishop Joseph's reception following his Episcopal Ordination at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament on May 20, 1987. It was a proud day for

the high school as hundreds of Church dignitaries, visitors from out of state, and the faithful of Altoona-Johnstown came here to honor the new bishop.

In June of 1989, Bishop Joseph appointed Monsignor Robert C. Mazur as Director of the Office of Liturgy for the Church of Altoona-Johnstown. By August, Dr. William J. Neugebauer, a 1968 alumnus, was appointed as seventh principal, becoming the first lay principal in the school's history. Under his direction, Bishop Guilfoyle High School achieved Middle States accreditation, formed a school board, began an endowment, and hired a Development Director.

In July 1955, Dr. Neugebauer ended his tenure as principal by accepting a position with the Baltimore County Public School District. By the first day of school that year, Bishop Joseph appointed Dr. Joseph E. Macharola as the eighth principal. Dr. Macharola had previously taught music and social studies at Bishop Guilfoyle. During his time as principal, he initiated "writing across the curriculum" to emphasize the importance of writing in every discipline. In 1997, he also oversaw, through the generosity of Mr. Anthony Misciagna, the establishment of two new computer labs complete with 60 state-of-the-art computers and stations. The old computer labs were completely renovated to become The Anthony Misciagna Technology Center.

In November of 1997, Dr. Macharola resigned as principal for another position, and Mr. Paul Hasson (Class of 1975) assumed the position from February to July of 1998. Bishop Joseph then appointed Reverend Leo Lynch, who had been chaplain of the school during the 1997-1998 school year, as principal beginning in August 1998. Under Father Lynch's leadership, faculty and staff worked assiduously to complete the *Validating the Vision* process, which successfully resulted in re-accreditation and commendation by the Middle States Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges in 2002. In addition, the Technology Center was again updated with new computers, and computers were added to the library and some classrooms. Father Lynch also put in place basic security measures, a crisis plan, and telephone communication throughout the school building.

In 2004 Father Lynch was appointed pastor of Saint Joseph Parish in Williamsburg, and Mr. Stuart Albaugh became principal until October of 2005, when he accepted another position closer to his home. He was responsible for establishing the school's mandatory drug testing policy which was enthusiastically received and supported by parents and students.

Three months later, at the end of January 2006, Mr. Robert Gervinski became the twelfth principal, coming from an impressive background of 35 years in public schools as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. He immediately introduced and carried out many new initiatives. In curriculum, dual enrollment courses, re-certified advanced placement courses, articulation agreements with Saint Francis University and Mount Aloysius College, and increased graduation requirements were put into place. Heightened public relations outreach and re-configuration of administrative positions and policies soon followed. Capital improvements, implementation of PowerSchool, a text messaging system for parents and students, security cameras throughout the school building and grounds, establishment of the Athletic Association, re-invigoration of the Alumni Association, and an expanded Development Office and staff all contributed to an atmosphere of progress and prospects of a bright future ahead.

In January of 2009, Mr. Gervinski resigned his position because of personal health issues. The Board acted immediately to place the administration of the school for the interim in the hands of Mr. Timothy Lucko (Dean of Students), Mrs. Joan Donnelly (Finance Director), and Sister Beverly Hmel, IHM (Associate Principal).

A highly significant milestone for our school is its establishment as of July 2008 as a 501(c)(3) corporation governed by a Board of Trustees while retaining its connection with the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown and its roots in Catholic tradition.

Bishop Guilfoyle Catholic High School exists because the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, our trustees, our parents, and our alumni treasure Catholic tradition and Christian values. The school is authorized with reserved power under the

leadership of the diocesan Bishop, Most Reverend Joseph V. Adamec. A CEO/Principal, Associate Principal, and Dean of Students comprise the administrative team, accompanied by a professional staff of 24 teachers, a campus minister, a guidance counselor, a librarian, a part-time nurse provided by the public school system, a computer technology specialist, and other support staff members. Alumni and parents are an integral part of our school. As our mission statement notes, this school community is “formed and bonded across the generations by a deep-rooted tradition of Catholic identity and values.” Since its beginning in 1922 as Altoona Catholic High School, approximately 9000 students have received diplomas, with most of those students continuing on into high education. Many leaders in the city of Altoona and around the country are alumni of the school and as such provide inspiration, precedent, and high expectations for all Guilfoyle students.

In a Christian community atmosphere of genuine concern for each individual’s religious, academic, and social growth, Bishop Guilfoyle Catholic High School continues the tradition of Catholic secondary education begun in 1922 and now confidently accepting the challenge of the twenty-first century, the third millennium of Christianity.

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