

## PREFACE

In 1991, a group of Catholic parents in Greenville were desperate. Their children were beginning to graduate from local parochial schools and there were no Catholic high schools within 100 miles of their homes. Their response to this deficit stirred up a firestorm; friends called it *chutzpah*, others called it foolish. They themselves called it visionary. They started their own Catholic school, without clergy support and against the wishes of their diocese. They had to believe their plan was visionary. Since they had invested so much of their futures in the place, they had to believe they were doing the right thing. It was unnerving to consider the ramifications of being wrong, especially since their children were the trial horses in this grand experiment.

And the secondary school they started is not Catholic in name only. St. Joseph's Catholic School is a traditional Catholic institution loyal to the magisterium of the Church and dedicated to forming the spiritual character of its students in the true faith.

The parents who opened the now-thriving school in 1993 talk about their decision then as a leap of faith; it was also the financial equivalent of going to sea in a dinghy during hurricane season. But considering the circumstances and their profound faith, they considered the risk necessary.

“It was frustrating. We got shot down more than once,” said Barbara McGrath, one of the founders of St. Joseph's Catholic School. “But I'd been educated in Catholic schools and knew what a gift it would be for my children.”

In 1993, there were 3 Catholic secondary schools in the entire state of South Carolina, one in the coastal see city of Charleston (the entire state is one diocese), one in the capital Columbia in the middle of the state, and one tiny missionary school for disadvantaged youth run by a religious order of nuns in Sumter, 30 miles southeast of Columbia. The state is 31,000 square miles in area and there was no Catholic education available after eighth grade in the western half of all that real estate.

Balancing those glum statistics, however, is the painful fact that South Carolina is less than four percent Catholic. (editor's note: the notoriously hard to compute Hispanic population may actually double that figure in 2008.) Years ago, when the planning about St. Joe's turned serious, that percentage was even lower. But demographics are more than just overall percentages. Inland rural counties in the state, across the sand hills of the Pee Dee and the peach groves of the Ridge, often have no Catholic presence of any sort and a mere scattering of Catholic residents. The historic coastal city of Charleston, on the other hand, is ten percent Catholic, including its long-time mayor, Joe Riley. Its diocesan high school has a student population of nearly 1,000. And in the Upstate, in the Piedmont Deanery of the diocese, there is a substantial chunk of Catholicism also. The areas along the Anderson-Greenville-Spartanburg corridor in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains contain 12 Catholic parishes.

Many members of those Upstate parishes work for the hundreds of companies that located in the Greenville area because of the network of highways, the available work force, amenable climate and low housing costs. Once a prosperous textile manufacturing area, the Upstate was reborn in the 1990s with the influx of such foreign giants as Michelin and BMW. Clemson University with commercial and state partners has just opened an enormous international automotive engineering research facility within a stone's throw of the private, Catholic high school these parents started and BMW announced a major expansion of its manufacturing facilities in March 2008.

Nurtured by this rich blend of money and intellect, private schools thrive as alternatives to generally mediocre public institutions. But there was no Catholic secondary school until 1993 when nine parents decided to risk their money, their reputations and their children's futures by launching one. What was then known as St. Joseph's High School opened with thirteen ninth graders, no athletic programs and no real campus in a house rented to them for \$1 a year by a neighborhood Lutheran church. It was home schooling with a professional faculty. Most of the teachers were part-time or volunteers at first, according to McGrath. One of the first students, Allison Moon, wrote about her venture in a school newsletter on the occasion of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the now-successful school:

“There were three classrooms, in what had formerly been a living room and two bedrooms. The other bedroom contained a soda machine, and was affectionately dubbed ‘the student lounge.’ The Principal’s Office, with its glass doors looking into the main classroom, closely resembled the dining room it had once been. To cap off this ‘one-room-schoolhouse’ motif, there was a picnic table and tire swing in the back yard. Some of my best memories of high school are from hanging out in that backyard with all of my classmates.” Even though the pupils and teachers were enthusiastic about their experience, the odds against success seemed huge.

“The real heroes were not the founders but the parents who put their children in the first year. That took courage,” McGrath said.

The students attended local parishes for Friday mass and the YMCA for physical education classes; they seemed satisfied with their limited resources and tiny class sizes. They were a homogeneous lot, bright and ambitious. That attracted more of the same as the years crept by. SJHS added a grade each year and graduated its first class in 1997. The school’s board of trustees, which still manages the institution today, insisted on an authentic Catholic milieu and high academic standards. But a massive struggle for existence ensued - and it was not the financial obstacles that the school’s founders had anticipated and, indeed, faced on a daily basis; another real antagonist turned out to be the very organization they first went to for help, the Diocese of Charleston. Bureaucrats at the chancery, including the superintendent of education, fought the private venture strenuously. Angry words flew, ugly letters were exchanged and area priests took sides, until they were finally banned from offering the sacraments to the students at St. Joe’s.

“How can we explain this to our children?” a tearful parent asked the bishop.

But these lay people, bolstered by the support of a few courageous priests, soldiered on and by the time St. Joe’s purchased its present buildings and 36-acre campus shortly after its first commencement exercises, the school was flourishing as its reputation as an academically rigorous, traditional Catholic school blossomed. Enrollment increased in great bounds each year. Its annual tuition of about \$8,000 was

and is considered moderate for a first-class private prep school in the Piedmont of South Carolina.

The one canker that continued to affect the flowering of this popular institute was the lack of a diocesan imprimatur. Fearful of financial entanglement in a period of litigation and increasing ministry costs, and beset on all sides by the bureaucrats mentioned above, the Bishop of Charleston still refused to give the school his blessing. Since nothing can legitimately be called Catholic without the say-so of the diocesan ordinary, according to canon law, St. Joseph's was reduced to promoting itself as "a private school in the Catholic tradition." Some diocesan officials in Charleston and some local clergy at the time thought the new school was too conservative; others apparently opposed the idea of a Catholic school that they did not control; and nobody there wanted to inherit the expense of another high school by default if the Upstate school could not make it financially. Even with its substantial tuition levies, St. Joseph's runs an annual operating deficit of nearly half a million dollars. Sport celebrities such as Lou Holtz and Tommy Lasorda help with fund-raising, but it remains an enduring effort for the school.

"We have a full-time advancement office, just to raise enough money every year to stay in the black," said Keith Kiser, now entering his eighth year as headmaster.

By 2000, floating millions of dollars in bond issues, the school renovated and expanded yet again, this time in a year of high expectations. A new diocesan bishop had been ordained the year before and had been learning about St. Joseph's as part of his ministry to the Piedmont Deanery, which is much closer geographically to the Diocese of Charlotte in North Carolina than to Charleston. In that year, one that is considered the most important in the school's history after the inaugural one, he came to the Greenville campus. The Most Rev. Robert J. Baker signed a momentous agreement with St. Joseph's: he gave the school his official blessing and promised to guide it in matters of the faith and the school promised to maintain its educational and fiscal independence.

Area priests were no longer hesitant about ministering to the school, so the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation became a regular part of campus life. The school built a Blessed Sacrament Chapel, open whenever the

building is occupied. Still, St. Joseph's realized it needed a chaplain on its faculty. Enter Dwight Longenecker.

Father Longenecker is a former Anglican priest who converted, with his wife and children, to Catholicism. He's a well-known theological writer and speaker who wished to relocate to the United States from his adopted home in Great Britain.

"It was a perfect fit for us," Longenecker said. "Plus, we always wanted to send our children to a private school that is both affordable and non-classist."

St. Joe's offers reduced tuition for children of faculty members and staffers.

Bishop Baker approved Longenecker's request for faculties in the Roman rite in early 2006 and forwarded the paperwork to Rome; the chaplain was ordained a Catholic priest in November 2006, and SJCS became the first Catholic school in South Carolina with a full-time priest chaplain.

The school, meanwhile, continued to progress. It opened its own middle school in 2003, an immediate success, and became known by its present name, St. Joseph's Catholic School. The middle school has doubled its enrollment every year since and had a waiting list for the 2007-2008 academic year. With 250 students, the upper school became a rising power in the S.C. Independent Schools Association, winning state championships in soccer, cross-country, wrestling, swimming, math, Quiz Bowl, Student Council and in the S. C. Junior Academy of Science competitions. The SJCS Knights are a power in interscholastic rugby. The average SAT score in 2006-2007 was 1212 (compared to the SC average of 939), and more than a dozen seniors have so far made the grade as National Merit Scholarship finalists, ranking them in the top one percent nationally. More than 60 percent of SJCS's 200 middle schoolers qualify for the Duke University TIP (Talent Identification Program) each year, based on SAT scores in seventh grade. The middle school grades, 6, 7 and 8<sup>th</sup>, are taught in single-gender classes.

In 2005, 2006 and again in 2007, the Catholic High School Honor Roll recognized SJCS as one of the 50 Best Catholic High Schools in the United States. St. Joseph's ranked in the top 20 academically. Every graduate goes to a four-year college and many are accepted to the most selective institutions

of higher learning. Nearly 80 percent of students taking Advanced Placement courses passed the AP exam in their discipline (104 out of 134 AP classes taken in 2007).

With all these athletic and academic successes, the school administration fights hard to temper the influence of secular society on its pupils, 80 percent of whom are Catholic. Besides weekly mass, where the students chant the Sanctus and the Pater Noster in Latin, and daily religion classes, SJCS has also implemented a household program as a way to carrying out the school's duty to act *in loco parentis*. The program was Kiser's idea as the school began to grow too large to be managed any longer as a big family; he described its evolution in terms of the partnership between parents and school.

"We wanted someone on the faculty or staff to accompany each student, as an individual, from freshman year through graduation, to help with his or her academics and goals and problems. It's a matter of noticing more than anything," the headmaster said.

One school adult, most often a teacher, is assigned as Household Dean. He or she stays with the one single-gender household (each replete with colorful dynastic names, such as Gallowglass, the Golden Swans and the Black Falconers) permanently; each household is an equal mix from each of the four secondary school grades. All assemblies, intramural competitions and service projects are carried out by household, one male often paired with its sister female household of the same name. Households are normally from 12 to 16 strong. Since the households meet as home rooms in the morning and one other time each day for chapel call or study hall or some other activity – even if it's no more than free time – the dean gets to know the students in his household much better than the students in his classes. After all, the dean is with each student daily for four years, so he or she gets to notice each one as Kiser had hoped. The household members bond with each other and with their dean. Seniors, at least in theory, provide leadership and mentoring for the underclassmen.

Parents soon learn to call or email the deans to collect assignments for sick days, ask teachers for their student's averages or to intercede when directions are misinterpreted or other minor pupil-teacher disputes or contrempts arise. Teachers regularly visit each other about their household

charges. If someone's grades begin to slip in math, for instance, the math teacher will generally give the student's dean a heads-up. If academic problems become significant, the household dean will arrange and facilitate parent-teacher meetings during faculty office hours or during planning periods.

Households serve a societal function as well, helping incoming students to fit into the culture of the school. Kiser gave an example of one youngster in his own household who didn't seem to find his niche during his entire freshman year and remained an outsider. He didn't play sports, wasn't gifted enough to compete on academic teams and was too shy for SJCS's extensive programs in campus ministry and performing arts. He was not happy at the school.

"In fact, he didn't want to come back for his sophomore year," Kiser said. "As his dean, I was chatting with his mother one day and she told me that he was a budding artist. I passed that on to (the chair of the Fine Arts Dept.) and she got him involved."

The student capped off his career at St. Joe's by designing and painting a mammoth wall mural in a new middle school hallway that generated high acclaim; he graduated and entered a well-known college arts program.

The headmaster said that the household program was not yet in its definitive form, and the same might be said of St. Joseph's Catholic School. But from the most modest of beginnings the institution has become a force in South Carolina's Catholic community and continues to grow as that community does.

What lessons can we learn from this apparent success story? Are lay-driven private Catholic schools the way to preserve our real faith at the secondary school level?

This book will use the experience of St. Joe's to illustrate the trials and tribulations of starting such a school - it might even be used as a template in areas of the country that are seeing enormous growth in their Catholic population even as dioceses are reluctant to take on other expenses and as religious teaching orders are reduced in size and are generally closing schools rather than opening new ones. The St. Joe's experience might also be interesting to parents who want more than the watered down Catholicism that many so-called Catholic schools offer.

This is not a fairy tale, however. Opening and maintaining a private Catholic school proved to be an enduring challenge in many ways, but once again, the experience of these daring parents - who still control their school - might prove beneficial to others dreaming of such a venture themselves. It's a great story, even if you're a grandparent like me and are more interested in how our faith is going to survive in this era of Cafeteria Catholicism and rampant secular humanism than in educating our children any longer. I hope young people will take heart and learn to appreciate both what parents risk for their well-being and what daring students can achieve.

Following the cover-ups and breaking scandals of recent years, no Catholic should be surprised to learn that men and women of faith who run dioceses share the same fallen nature as the rest of us. This work is not meant as an exposé, even if some pastors and diocesan bureaucrats will be unhappy to read about themselves and their malfunctions, but it does illustrate how people with vision can make practical plodders seem trite and tired. Some of the leaders of St. Joseph's Catholic School and others in the Catholic community of South Carolina have voiced concern, when they heard about this book being written, that the dispute between diocese and private school will make the Church look bad. I don't know if that's possible after what we've been through recently with the unconscionable hiding of sex abusers in the presbyterate, but I do wish to be explicit here: some officials of the Diocese of Charleston opposed the establishment of St. Joseph's Catholic School for personal reasons. Some thought, and undoubtedly still think, the school to be too traditional, too Catholic; some pastors surely have fallen victim to the sense of righteousness that comes with being the sole authority in their parish fiefdoms for a long time, have forgotten their assigned role as servants of the faithful and think that lay people ought to stay in their proper place; some Curia members resented the loss of control that a private Catholic entity on their turf represented; and other diocesan workers may have been turned off by personality clashes with one or the other of the founders. These rationales for arguing and fighting against a needed Catholic high school are examples of human shortcomings, the sins of our original parents visited on us. Those foibles have nothing to

do with God's Church, however. All the people who started and now run St. Joseph's Catholic School remain faithful to the magisterium of the Catholic Church, loyal and obedient to their bishop, respectful and grateful to priests, observant participants in the sacramental life of the Church. They harbor no overt bitterness, just gratitude that things worked out for the better eventually. And St. Joseph's Catholic School today enjoys the support and encouragement of area pastors, even when its middle school competes with their parochial schools for students.

Even in the wider schema of things, the Diocese of Charleston and the private school are cooperating partners in the education of South Carolina Catholic children. If non-Catholics read this, I trust that they will be open-minded enough to recognize this current alliance and comprehend that the past dispute was an example of human interaction and had nothing to do with our faith. After all, Job bargained with God and Peter denied the Messiah three times. The end result in those biblical cases, and the end result of the SJCS dispute, was an even stronger devotion and closer allegiance to the faith.

The fact remains that the Diocese of Charleston once opposed this independent Catholic school bitterly, going so far as to issue a decree to area priests forbidding them from ministering to St. Joseph's in any way. We'll learn the rationale behind that position. Against all odds, with their own Church seemingly intent on destroying their grand effort, these doughty lay Catholics persevered. That is not to say that the parents who started this fine adventure were idealists; they protected themselves and did their homework, as we shall see.

If you're interested in starting a Catholic high school for your own children, then this story might be a good place to start. You could learn from the St. Joseph's family, from their courage, their foresight, and from their mistakes. If you want to read an exciting, true-life adventure, this might fill the bill. If you're an authentic Catholic, this story will thrill you. It might even inspire you.

