

Basilians and Secondary Education in Ontario

The Basilian Fathers, dedicated to education, came to be in response to conditions of extreme stress. Their first members began teaching clandestinely in 1797 in the very teeth of the Reign of Terror in France. When the situation improved they endured struggles both political and financial to keep their small schools going. By 1852, when their association was 30 years old, they had only 21 or so members. Even so, when the Bishop of Toronto, de Charbonnel, asked for their help, with trust in God's providence they sent four members across the Atlantic to face the perils of the new world.

Their first foundation was St. Mary's Little Seminary on Queen St. E, with 21 students. Money was scarce, so in 1853 Bishop de Charbonnel moved the seminary into unused space in his house, where the Brothers of the Christian Schools had established St. Michael's College for boys in 1851. The two institutions were merged and placed under the direction of the Basilian Fathers. In 1853 Lord Elmsley gave the Basilians 3 lots to the north of his property and with money from France, they started building and St. Michael's College moved to Clover Hill. The curriculum, reflecting the French origins of the staff, involved 5 years of Latin studies as well as mathematics, Greek and English. It was geared primarily for aspirants to the priesthood, and established an enviable tradition in that regard.

Meanwhile, in Sandwich (now Windsor) Father Point, a Jesuits attempted to establish secondary and college level education. He built a school in 1855. A Basilian, Father Malbos, took over in 1858, obtaining an official "Act of Incorporation" from the government, leading eventually to much-needed government grants. But Fr. Malbos' stay ended in October of the year it began, and the whole enterprise remained in jeopardy until 1870, when the Basilians returned under the direction of Fr. Denis O'Connor. The curriculum included both classical and commercial courses, and, as at St. Michael's, enrolled students from the United States to help pay the bills.

Father Henry Carr became President of St. Michael's in 1904. He was aware that the curriculum was outdated. More and more Catholic youth were attracted to the professions and a modern high school curriculum was needed to serve their needs. Fr. Carr successfully transformed the programme of studies so that St. Michael students qualified for university entrance. By 1906 the post-secondary department of St. Michael's became as an independent Arts College, federated with the University of Toronto.

Similar changes took place at Assumption College under the presidency of Father R. Francis Forster, appointed in 1907. He brought the secondary school curriculum up to Department of Education standards, separated the high school and college departments, and aimed at raising the standards of the latter. Not without difficulty, in 1920, the post-secondary department affiliated with the University of Western Ontario.

The Great Depression hit both institutions hard. At St. Michael's Fr. Henry Bellisle, perceiving that students could not afford to commute to the high school established two

annexes, west on Dundas St. at Bloor and east on Lee Avenue north of Queen St. They were closed in the early 40's.

In 1950 St. Michael's College School moved from Clover Hill to a campus at the corner of Bathurst Street and St. Clair Avenue, and in 1957 Assumption High School moved to a separate campus on Huron Church Line.

In the '50's the Basilians opened four more high schools in Ontario. Priests of the Sault Diocese who had attended St. Michael's successfully lobbied the Basilians for two schools. In 1951 the Basilians took possession of a former orphanage in Sudbury, which had to serve as their home and their class-room space while a permanent school was built to house the new St. Charles College. So tight were finances that Fr. Matthew Mulcahy, the founding principal, sent the teaching seminarians out to sell raffle tickets to local miners as they exited their shifts. In 1956 two Basilians, Frs. Mulcahy and Patrick Lalonde, bunked in a Sault rectory and then lived above a stage in the school auditorium while they supervised the building of St. Mary's College.

An anecdote, perhaps apocryphal, belongs to the history of Michael Power High School in Etobicoke. While the Basilian Superior General, Fr. George Flahiff, was attending a large gathering, to his surprise Cardinal McGuigan announced that the Basilians would open a Catholic high school in the west part of the city. Michael Power opened its doors in 1957.

Finally, the Basilians went to Ottawa in 1958 and established their first co-ed high school, St. Joseph's, teaching along with several communities of Sisters.

When full funding became a reality in Ontario all of the Basilian high schools opted to become part of Catholic school boards. All became co-educational institutions except St. Michael's College School, which subsequently opted for private status once again. Four Basilians presently work there, but all the other institutions are ably staffed by laypersons.

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