

The History of Muskegon Catholic Central

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THE HISTORY OF MUSKEGON CATHOLIC CENTRAL

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Abstract

Catholic Education has been in existence in Muskegon County for well over 100 years.

Beginning shortly after World War II, motivated and passionate Catholics began to organize a campaign to centralize the city's three Catholic High Schools. The dream became a reality in 1953 with the opening of Muskegon Catholic Central High School. This paper tells the story of how this epic project was completed, and shares stories of the school's impact throughout its sixty-year existence.

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Muskegon Catholic Central, like most Catholic schools created in the past 100 years, was built by people. Faithful Catholics, mostly recent immigrants, who came to the United States looking for a new start to include religious freedom often found that school choices for their children did not include anything at all to do with their beloved Catholic faith. So these Catholics acted in the fashion of true American Dreamers and started their own schools. The climate for building Catholic schools at that time was very different from the climate of today. There was nearly across-the-board support from the parish priests, leadership from bishops, and large, growing populations who desired only a Catholic education. There was no other choice. The recent immigrants in Muskegon were made up of Irish, German, Italian, French, Polish and Hungarian groups. First they built their own ethnic parishes and schools. Then they dreamed of and eventually realized a centralized Catholic high school for all students. This is the story of these people, of their efforts, their challenges, their steadfastness, and their ability to build a school sixty years ago that still stands strong and proud today. This is the story of the people who built Muskegon Catholic Central.

Muskegon Catholic Central began as a dream of committed Catholics in the period of years following World War II. In a pamphlet presented to all parishioners of the eight Catholic parishes in the city of Muskegon, Clergy Chairman of the School Board for Muskegon Catholic Central during this time, Monsignor Albert Kehren, began with the following statement, entitled *Tribute to the Faithful* (1965), “American Catholic schools developed, in large measure, from the desire of Catholics to have their children taught in a school system that was harmonious with Catholic teaching. This was a reaction to a basic tradition that was prevalent in public schools in

the 19th century. What began as a defensive measure is now accepted on its own merits. Catholic schools stand on their own, forming a recognized system of education. They are a vital part of American education and culture, and above all, a tribute to the sacrifice and generosity of Catholic people.”

His summary of the history of Catholic schools in the United States at that time was accurate. Catholic schools were started through the sacrifice of many Catholic people who wanted their children to be raised and educated in their faith. Muskegon Catholic Central was no exception, and the generosity of Catholic people and the clear support of the local priests made the long dreamt-of idea of a centralized high school a reality in 1953.

To put into context the impetus that existed to build Muskegon Catholic Central, here is a summary of the major events in the history of Catholic education in Muskegon:

The parishes in Muskegon reflected what was happening in other urban parishes in America at that time. Instead of melting into one America, immigrants of the Catholic faith formed parishes and then schools which consisted of their specific ethnic group. In 1871, three sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Michigan came to St. Mary’s Parish in Muskegon in September, with the specific duty of organizing a school. According to parish archives, “the first St. Mary’s School was a small wooden structure 26 x 40 x 14 with 95 students in attendance” (Catholic Campaigner, 1955). St. Mary’s Parish was made up of primarily Irish descendants and immigrants. In 1885, St. Joseph’s Parish,

which was primarily German, opened a two-story school building for elementary students. St. Joseph's was also in the downtown area of the city, just three blocks away from St. Mary's. The two schools existed in a loose partnership with each other. It is fair to say that they were friendly rivals. In 1888, six Ursuline nuns arrived in Muskegon to open St. Jean's Catholic School. St. Jean de Baptiste was primarily a church of French descendants and immigrants. They opened a Day Academy for Girls shortly thereafter. Muskegon now had three Catholic schools to serve their parishioners. All of these schools were located within in a one mile radius. In 1904, St. Jean's constructed a permanent school for girls at St. Jean's.

As the schools steadily grew, the need for better accommodations grew as well. St. Mary's added a four-year high school program to their school, becoming the city's first Catholic high school. This occurred in 1912. St. Jean's increased its capacity as well by constructing a two-story building in 1913. They then expanded their school to a twelve-year program in 1923. St. Joseph's followed suit in 1928 by adding a high school program. The city now had three K-12 Catholic schools, St. Mary's, St. Jean's and St. Joseph's.

The rapid rise in Catholic school enrollment increased the need for more schools still. St. Michael's Parish, primarily a parish of Polish descendants and immigrants, opened adjacent to the parish church in 1914. Two Mercy Sisters and approximately 40 students made up the initial St. Michael staff and student body. To meet the demands of increasing enrollment, a new school building was opened in 1925. The enrollment peaked at 470 students in 1930. Sacred Heart opened a

school in 1940, to serve the city's Hungarian population. Six Dominican Sisters from their motherhouse in nearby Grand Rapids opened the school. By 1951, the enrollment reached 510 students. Sacred Heart added a new grade school building in 1966.

The Catholic school's dependence on religious sisters was very apparent in Muskegon. The Ursuline Sisters, who arrived and opened an academy for girls in 1904, left Muskegon in 1919, forcing the closing of the girl's academy. But the presence of Sisters of Mercy, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Dominicans were the primary factors in the opening and continued existence of the city's Catholic schools.

This dependence continued as two more parish schools were opened in the ensuing decades. In 1955, St. Francis De Sales Elementary School opened with the arrival of five Bernadine Sisters and one lay teacher for grades 2-7. By 1962, the enrollment at St. Francis Elementary school had grown to 776 students, with an average of 49 students in each of the sixteen classrooms! St. Francis was not comprised of any particular ethnic group, as the city's neighborhoods had begun to break up and blend together. In 1961, Our Lady of Grace Parish Elementary School opened with the arrival of three Sisters of St. Francis from Joliet, Illinois. The school initially enrolled 81 students. This parish served primarily the city's Italian immigrants and descendants. By 1963, Our Lady of Grace Elementary School became a full eight grade school with four classrooms.

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After a period of stagnation during the Great Depression, there was a definite upswing in attendance in the city's Catholic elementary and high schools. The city had become known as town of workers, primarily in the defense industry, and was quite diverse and geographically spread over a wide area. The city's Catholic high schools were sufficient, but dreams of a large, modern facility started to gain steam. According to school records, the idea of a centralized Catholic Central High School was first advanced in the late 1920's.

In this period of growth following the Great Depression, the idea came to the attention of the Diocesan School Board, and on May 7, 1942, a committee of the Diocesan School Board, after consultation with Bishop Joseph Plagens, met with Greater Muskegon pastors to discuss the possibility of a central Catholic high school. It did not take the committee long to reconvene and, on October 19, 1942 another committee meeting was held, and the concept was wholeheartedly agreed upon, albeit with the construction having to wait until the end of the war. But the building fund was established, with each parish setting aside 5% of their annual income for the purpose. This is a significant factor as it is juxtaposed with today's Catholic School dilemma: parish support was a given during this time period. The parish pastors made it a point of priority to lead the charge for Catholic Schools. This was certainly evident in the history of Muskegon Catholic schools. Every artifact shows this to be true.

The next major milestone in the planning process occurred on August 17, 1944. After the illness and death of Bishop Plagens, further action had been

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deferred until the newly installed Bishop Francis J. Haas, an educator, called a meeting of 29 prominent businessmen to put into motion the project's next steps. Quite probably the first evidence of this idea is mentioned in a letter from then Bishop Haas to parishioner Martin Mullally in dated August 10, 1944. The letter stated, "I am inviting a small number of prominent Catholic laymen in Muskegon to a private dinner meeting with me at the Occidental Hotel on Thursday, August 17 at 6:30 P.M. and would like very much to have you present" (M. Mullally, personal communication, August 4, 1944).

Encouraged by the enthusiasm shown at the meeting, Bishop Haas announced plans for a campaign to raise \$750,000 to be held from November 15 to December 7, 1944, to correspond with the Sixth War Loan Drive.

Of all of the events that led to Muskegon Catholic Central as we know it today, the rally held on November 15, 1944 may be the most prescient. The campaign, entitled "For Their Tomorrow", was kicked off with a grand event at WKBZ Auditorium. At the rally, Bishop Haas announced that the school would be comparable to any Class A school in the state. The campaign fell short of its goal but did raise \$470,000, the largest amount collected for any project in Muskegon history at that time. The momentum for the new school was undeniable, and now had a substantial amount of financial capital behind it. The rally of 1952, which will be described later in this paper, surpassed this initial rally in size and scope, but this is the one that really got the project started.

The rally was the result of extensive planning by Bishop Haas. He appointed an executive committee composed of the pastor and one lay member from each of the six parishes. Mr. Martin Mullally was appointed as general chairman and Fr. Albert Kehren as executive secretary for the campaign. Martin Mullally's sons John and Jim, whose children and now grandchildren attend Muskegon Catholic, remember stories of their father's efforts on the campaign: "The enthusiasm for the campaign was unstoppable. The clergy carried the fundraising. It was incredible! Dad used to say that it was because of the Bishop (Haas). He was much more stringent about making sure the clergy carried out his orders than today. Bishop Haas was a very bright guy. He wrote a book, 'Man and Society', it was called. He had a much larger vision than just making the clergy kowtow" (J. & J. Mullally, personal communication, February 25, 2014).

The sons fondly recalled how their father would be gone on a week night, and their mother would say 'Father sure has a lot of meetings about that school!' Families like the Mullallys make up a large part of the passionate alumni base that supports the school still today. The school has been literally passed down from one generation to the next for the past sixty years, and even longer if one considers the original parish schools.

The next major step in the history of the school occurred on January 14, 1945 with the purchase of the school property. The property, consisting of almost seventy acres at the corner of Barclay and Laketon Streets, was purchased for \$48,421.00 from the Brunswick-Balke-Collendar Company, which was a major

bowling ball and bowling alley producer as well as a phonograph producer in town. The five percent realtor fee was donated by the Catholic realtors of Muskegon, which brought the final purchase price to \$46,000. According to the Greater Muskegon Catholic Campaigner (1944), "The property presents one of the finest high school campuses in the country, and is it without doubt, the most desirable locality that could be had for such a purpose."

The aforementioned Greater Muskegon Catholic Campaigner deserves mention here. The weekly publication was established to further the interest in the campaign as announced at the 1944 rally. The first issue was published on November 12, 1944, with the pledge "to bring to you each Sunday morning the fullest news of this biggest united Catholic undertaking in our history". The grand language represented well the gravitas of the campaign and its lofty goals.

Due to the Muskegon area being hard hit by the post-war economy, the Bishop and the Executive Committee delayed construction on the school. Again from the Catholic Campaigner (1955), "As the fund grew slowly, local Catholics realized that the change-over from the war-time economy to peace-time production would be a gradual process. The Greater Muskegon Area was hard hit and was classified at one time as a "depressed area." Consequently, in the opinion of the Bishop and the Executive Committee, it was considered prudent to delay construction of Catholic Central." This particular article did make sure to mention that Bishop Haas, on his many visits to Muskegon, promised to begin construction

as soon as possible. His leadership and unwavering support of the project was critical throughout.

As was presented earlier, Muskegon consisted of a very diverse population of Catholic ethnicities at this time. Despite all of the momentum for the concept of a centralized school, the reality of combining all of the ethnic and parish high school groups into one locale was a challenge. What was needed was a common interest, beyond the Catholic faith. The Catholic faith was already available to each group in their own parishes and parish schools. According to school historian and current/long-time teacher Henry Salisz, “I told the priests, the first thing you need to do is to build a football field. If not, you won’t have a centralized school. All groups need to pull together as one unit. Football will unite the community. If you don’t, you’ll have a helluva time getting donations.” (H. Salisz, personal communication, February 11, 2014).

The lofty plans for the field began shortly thereafter, and the expectations were high. According to local sports writer Jim Henderson, “If present plans materialize, it will be the eventual showplace for local sports” (Catholic Campaigner, 1955). Henry Salisz’ words proved to be prophetic. Sports are often a galvanizing force for communities, and in particular high school football. The history of football in Catholic schools is well-documented in the United States, and it continues to this day. In fact, Muskegon Catholic won their 9th state championship this past November, and the school is well-respected for their long history of success on the gridiron. This history began on October 23, 1949, as the

school's field was blessed and dedicated prior to the game between St. Mary's Muskegon and Saginaw Saints Peter and Paul. The "powerful" ceremony introduced what was called in local journals, "the best football field for high schools in the state" (Catholic Campaigner, 1955). It is seemingly inaccurate to call the field "the school's field" as the school was not yet built. But, as reiterated by Henry Salisz, the football field needed to be built first. This was an original example of "if you build it, they will come," as popularized by the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*.

With the football field completed, the focus and impetus turned to the actual architectural plans for the school building. The pre-planning and approval of the drawings was truly a collaborative process, as Bishop Haas called together for a meeting the Diocesan Superintendent of Schools Monsignor Murphy, supervisors of the various teaching sisterhoods in the diocese, and Fr. Kehren, along with the newly hired architect Edwin Valentine. Following numerous conferences and work by Mr. Valentine, the Executive Committee granted their approval of the sketches and plans for the school building, in the presence of Bishop Haas, on December 11, 1949. The Diocesan Building Committee followed by granting their approval, and likewise for the Department of Public Instruction in Lansing. According to the Catholic Campaigner (December 4, 1955), "His Excellency Bishop Haas was safe and assured in sending a letter of approval in August of 1950 which included the following statement, 'I am happy to authorize the (1) Acceptance of the preliminary plans for the entire structure, that is

scholastic unit, gymnasium and cafeteria (2) The continuation of continuing working drawing for the scholastic unit”’.

On May 14, 1951, under the watchful and approving eyes of Bishop Francis Haas and a surprisingly large crowd, ground was broken at 10:00 a.m. for the Greater Muskegon Catholic Central High School. It had been nearly eight years since Bishop Haas had been installed as Bishop of the Diocese of Grand Rapids, and from the outset he set his sights on seeing this day to fulfillment. He and fellow supporters had endured the end of World War II and the ensuing depressed post-war economy to see the project through to this step. Amazingly, Bishop Haas oversaw two campaigns at the same time: one for the Muskegon Catholic Central High School, and the same for a Catholic Central High School in Grand Rapids. The fact that he was able to see both projects to completion given the timing is a testament to the vigor and passion of Bishop Haas. The dedication of scores of volunteers and hundreds of donors never wavered despite the decision to delay construction due to the post-war economy. This dedication would be necessary to carry out the actual construction of the school through to completion, and to maintain the school over the next several decades. In fact, dedication by the staff and supporters of the school has carried it through to today.

It was soon clear to Fr. Kehren and the Executive Committee that more funds would be needed (this would be a recurring theme throughout the 60 year history of the school!). On September 14, 1952, another campaign was begun to raise more funds for construction. Again, Fr. Kehren served as clergy chair and

Martin Mullally served as Executive Director of the campaign. Eight parishes each set up a committee with a goal of having a total of 1,500 total volunteers obtain pledges for a total of \$750,000. A rally of the 1,500 workers was held at Central Campus auditorium, and the men went out afterward to collect the money. There are stories of current school supporters, sixty years later, remembering the father of the household leaving the house after dinner to walk the streets soliciting donations. By October 5, 1952, \$761,313.70 had been pledged.

On September 7, 1952, the cornerstone of the scholastic unit was blessed by the Right Reverend Monsignor Raymond Baker, Vicar General of the Diocese. Baker's brother, Francis, is the long-time chairman of the St. Joseph's Credit Union, which moved to the current Catholic Central campus when St. Joseph's School closed.

Construction had gone along on schedule, and it became certain that the school would be able to open in the fall of 1953. With that determination, that meant it was time to hire a principal and, of course, a football coach. Reverend Louis LaPres was appointed principal and Mike Corgan was hired as Athletic Director and head football coach. Mike Corgan's picture still hangs as the original photo in the Crusader Hall of Fame. They apparently do not induct principals into such places, for despite being well-loved, Fr. LaPres' photo is not found in the school's hallways. Stories of Coach Corgan, nicknamed "Bloody Mike", are legendary among Muskegon Catholic alumni: He was a tough, old-fashioned coach, who employed the famous "meat grinder" drill for all of his players. Even

the stars were not exempted from the grinder. He insisted that the school colors be green and gold, after the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame. Fr. LaPres was a kind and compassionate principal. For his first few years at Muskegon Catholic, he drove the twenty-one miles each way daily from Montague, where he was the pastor of St. James Parish, with a carload of students. They would wait each day for Fr. LaPres' day to be done to be driven home.

On June 7, 1953, the final commencement ceremonies were held at St. Mary's High School for fifty-three graduates, at St. Jean's for thirty-four, and at St. Joseph's for eighteen. It was bittersweet times for staff and supporters of the city's high schools, as the opening of a new centralized school meant the closing of theirs. These feelings by all accounts were overcome by the joyous anticipation of the new, modern, central high school. According to Donna Ladd, a graduate from St. Jean's final year of high school in June of 1953, there was a real sense of excitement in having one school. In fact, her parents, who were solidly middle class, with Donna's father working at Continental Motors and her mother as the "lunch lady" at St. Jean's, pledged to the campaign. Donna remembers this well. "There were no checking accounts then, so each week my parents would give me cash and I would walk to the office which was set up for the campaign to accept payments to people's pledges. My parents really believed that I, the youngest child, would go there. As it turned out, I missed by one year, as the school opened the fall following my graduation. But that's okay - we had a loving family at St.

Jean's and I have a lot of great memories from there" (D. Ladd, personal communication, February 27, 2014).

According to Jim Mullally, a member of the first four-year class to graduate from Muskegon Catholic in 1957, "We were excited about moving to the big, new building, and therefore not so sad about leaving St. Joseph's. We were not able to take much of the science classes or to have music classes like the other schools, and we knew the new school would offer that" (J. Mullally, personal communication, February 25, 2014). In fact, Jim's other brother Mart walked the 5-6 blocks each day to attend Muskegon High School's science classes, as he wanted to be a doctor. The new high school promised classes on equal footing with the public schools.

Whether intentional or not, there was a specific event that helped build the excitement for the new school beyond football. Every Friday, there was a dance held for all the Catholic high school students at the building adjacent to St. Mary's downtown parish, and all the students would gather and get to know one another. According to Donna, this helped build anticipation for the new school. "Every Friday, we would all meet for the dance, there were hundreds of us, and we would have such great times and excited conversations about being all together at one school" (D. Ladd, personal communication, February 27, 2014).

Donna's graduating class at St. Jean's had 34 students, and last year, they held their 60th class reunion. Twenty-nine of the 34 were able to attend, a very impressive percentage after so long. Donna believes that the bond of growing up

in a tight-knit Catholic school was a unifying bond for the group. “We met for our 60th class reunion last year, and 29 of the class were able to make it. We met for lunch - you do that when you get older - not dinner, but lunch. We talked about the old beloved St. Jean’s, and the nuns, and the expressions they would use on us, such as, ‘Boys, get your hands out of your pockets’, and ‘you have the posture of a jellyfish.’ Now we don’t know if we should meet every five years or what. We will probably just check in at lunch each year, but remembering our dear old school was so much fun!” (D. Ladd, personal communication, February 27, 2014). Donna laughed throughout these passages that she shared, and it was evident as she talked and shared stories that her life as a Catholic school student, mother, and now grandmother is really a special part of her and her family’s history.

The excitement generated by the building of the new school was translated into higher than anticipated enrollment. In June of 1953, construction began in earnest on the stadium for the football field, the cafeteria and gymnasium. The summer of 1953 was certainly an exciting time, with the sounds and sights of building construction and the arrival of new teachers and staff as all prepared for the first day of school at the “dream campus.” September could not come soon enough for the Catholic community of Muskegon.

With the joyous occasion of the opening of school less than two weeks away, Bishop Francis Haas died suddenly on August 29, 1953. He was credited with supporting and pursuing the project since practically the beginning. He had

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planned to bless the school on September 13. Although the community was deeply saddened by the death of the leader of the project, the realization that he had truly given his life in the line of duty, in the building of a modern, centralized school for the betterment of the children in his flock, gave many solace and further commitment to drive the dedication to the school. The Mullally family was particularly affected by the sudden death of the bishop, who had become quite close to them during the campaigns to build the school. They all went to Grand Rapids to pay their respects at the Cathedral. Donna Ladd was also saddened by the death, and she remembers being confirmed by Bishop Haas at St. Jean's Parish.

On September 9, 1953, after over seven years of planning and fundraising efforts, Muskegon Catholic Central High School opened its doors for the first time to approximately 800 students. In June of 1954, 117 seniors became the first graduating class of Muskegon Catholic Central.

Over the next two years, work continued as funds allowed on the completion of the cafeteria and gymnasium. On December 4, 1955, solemn dedication ceremonies were held with His Excellency and new Bishop Allen Babcock blessing the school and dedicating it to Our Lady of Schools.

Fr. Albert Kehren, who had chaired the original building campaign and was now titled as "Monsignor," oversaw steady growth at Muskegon Catholic Central. The growth was faster than they had planned for, with enrollment of 1,200 students in 1961. In 1964, Monsignor Kehren and new principal Father

Herman Zerfas again gathered a committee together to start another campaign.

According to the cover letter for a pamphlet entitled *The Soul of Education is the Education of the Soul* and subtitled *Greater Muskegon Catholic Central High School, A United Endeavor for the Greater Honor and Glory of God*, which was sent to all parishioners (1964), “Catholic Central was built to serve 1,000 students. For the past six years, the school has been struggling with enrollment in excess of capacity. With each year the situation grows worse. For example, during this year alone, merely because of enrollment at Catholic Central, we had to deny enrollment to 575 Catholic students.” As part of the campaign, which was headed entirely by the parish priests, *Typical Memorial Opportunities* were listed in the pamphlet, citing examples such as: “exterior construction patron for \$100,000, Crucifix for \$1,000, Blackboard for \$700, and numerous other options.” A table with the heading “Let True Sacrifice for Almighty God Be the Measure of your Gift” showed a sample amount of a weekly sacrifice, and the math was even done for the recipients to show what each amount would add up to over a full year. As a final piece to the campaign, the seven priests asked all supporters to “join us in asking God’s blessing on our historic inter-parish undertaking by praying this prayer daily.”

Campaign Prayer

Oh my God, I want to love You,

Not that I might gain

Eternal heaven nor escape eternal hell,

But, Lord to love You just because

You are my God.

Grant me to give to You

And not to count the cost;

To fight for you and not to mind the wounds;

To labor and to ask for no reward

Except the knowledge that I serve my Lord.”

This campaign was again spearheaded by the local clergy in 1964. The parishes were the focal points of the campaign. Here is an announcement, printed in large bold print on the cover of parish bulletins: “General Phase Starts Today!! Today, after the last Mass in all parishes, the Campaign Workers will begin visiting all those unable to participate in the Memorial Program. The Memorial Phase was most successful in setting the pace for giving. We trust that the true spirit of the Christmas season will motivate those to be visited to make their gifts of sacrifice in the light of the need that exists” (Catholic Campaigner, December 27, 1964).

Here is an additional parish announcement regarding the campaign from the same week (1964), “Catholic Central High School was erected and exists for **all** our families. Its expansion and continued existence is vital. Because we want everyone to participate in this campaign we are presenting an additional gift range for those unable to participate in the Memorial phase. This new gift category, which should be within the reach of most of our families, gives you the opportunity to become a benefactor of Catholic Central High School if you can budget as little as \$2.32 a week.”

In January of the following year, headlines in the Catholic Campaigner (1965) read, “Join now with our workers and parishioners who are leading the way in our program. A Gift of Sacrifice is needed from every Catholic in the Greater Muskegon area if we are to achieve complete success.” This headline is accompanied by a photo of a smiling/screaming boy and girl, shouting “HEY! 33 cents a day from you will assure my Catholic High School education. Please help me. BE A CATHOLIC CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL BENEFACTOR.” The following week’s edition had as its cover art a photo of a smiling mom and dad with a bubble of thought above their heads, with the words and pictures ‘Vacation...or Education?’ The bolded words along the bottom of the page read: **Sacrifice - Not Convenience** (Catholic Campaigner, January 1956).

As part of the campaign, the school saw the need and planned to house the four orders of nuns who taught at the school; the Dominicans, the Mercys, the St. Joseph Sisters of Nazareth, and the Felicians. They were all living in convents in

various parts of the city, which was not practical. There was also another development in process: the Christian Brothers order was in discussions to come to the school and teach, and eventually to take over the administration of the school. Plans were made to house them as well.

By February of 1965, the campaign had received pledges nearing \$700,000. Construction continued in earnest under the direction of architect Paul Vallierre and with the zealous direction and planning of new Principal Fr. Zerfus. By the fall of 1966, Bishop Babcock blessed the beautiful new facilities which included the convent and quarters for the Christian Brothers. Brothers Philip and Joel Damien were joined by Brothers Cormac, George and Michael in the new “brothers quarters.” According to the publication *Blessing and Dedication of the New Facilities: Classrooms, Chapel, Auditorium, Catholic Central Convent, Christian Brothers Residence, Chaplain’s Quarters of Greater Muskegon Catholic Central High School* (1966), “Today, Sunday, November 13, 1966, as Bishop Babcock blesses these beautiful new facilities, another milestone is reached in the history of one of the finest educational complexes in the Middle West.”

Fr. Louis LaPres resigned as principal due to health reasons in 1960, and was succeeded by Father Zerfus, who served well until 1966. At that time, Fr. Don Weber replaced Fr. Zerfus and was given the title of Superintendent. His was the responsibility for the entire school’s operations. To assist him, Mr. Edmund Farhat was hired as Assistant Superintendent. An administrative council was

created, which consisted of Fr. Weber, Mr. Farhat, the three counselors, and business manager Mr. Dennis Delaney. Also on the council were the two principals, one for the girl's wing, Sister Mary Paulette, and one for the boys wing, Mr. Jerome Allore. With the newly formed Administrative Council and the addition of the Christian Brothers, as well as the beautiful new facilities and a burgeoning enrollment, Muskegon Catholic Central High School was seemingly on a solid path to prosperity.

References to the difficulties that followed were hard to find, if not non-existent. There is a reference to "the financial crises of the late sixties" in a 1973 edition of the Catholic Campaigner, but not much else. It is known that the Christian Brothers arrangement, which began with such high hopes in the mid-1960's, had turned out quite badly. According to Henry Salisz, the Brothers each had their own set of maladies and troubles which made them incapable of being good role models and teachers, and certainly incapable of running the school. By 1980, the Christian Brothers were gone, as were nearly all religious sisters. The task of running, leading and staffing Catholic schools had become a daunting one for lay Catholics throughout the United States, and Muskegon Catholic Central was no exception.

Peg Alexander began her long career at Muskegon Catholic in 1983, and according to her, "there seemed to be a vacuum here both spiritually and academically" (M. Alexander, personal communication, February 26, 2014) when she arrived. Peg and her husband Dave moved to Muskegon from Jackson,

Michigan, and had both graduated from Jackson Lumen Christi High School, a top-performing Catholic school in southern Michigan. They both felt strongly that Muskegon Catholic “could not hold a candle to their former school in any way,” (D. & M. Alexander, personal communication, February 26, 2014) and that Dave indicated that he would not send their children here because of the current state of the school. Finances were not sustainable, and the cost of staffing the school and replacing the Christian Brothers was just too much for the school’s structure to handle. The leadership was not able to provide either the necessary funding or the clear direction to pull the school out of the dire situation, and the financial strains put a serious damper on faculty culture. In 1985, the school hired Dr. Mike Skube as Executive Director and Henry Salisz took over as Business Manager. Their tall task was to address a huge operating deficit. The local newspaper called it a “secular miracle,” (The Muskegon Chronicle, July 17, 1985), as the two men turned around the finances with round after round of very tough budget cuts as well as a 10% tuition hike. For the 1986 school year, the school was able to approve its first balanced budget in seven years. The scars were palpable, as the staff was asked to renounce many benefits, but the finances were stable enough to move forward.

The downside of these measures was that, according to Alexander, “there was no mission, and no living Christianity within the school” (M. Alexander, personal communication, February 26, 2014). The chapel, which was opened to great fanfare as part of the 1966 additions, was actually closed and not in use most

of the time. To Dr. Skube's credit, what he lacked in warmth and caring, he made up for in having the ability to build a good team. This began in 1987 with the naming of Mrs. Christine Vettese as principal. Her theme for the 1987 year (as advertised on the cover of the yearbook) was "The Pride is Back", which would seem to indicate that the pride was at least lacking prior to that. In 1988, Pat O'Toole was promoted from the teaching ranks to assistant principal, and the makings of a long-term team of focused administrators began to take shape. O'Toole was able to improve the school's academic standing and Catholic Identity, two vital areas that had been practically non-existent for so long. Russ Gallas, the new Campus Minister, deserves much of the credit for developing a strong sense of Catholic Identity. The sublime efforts of O'Toole, Gallas and the staff set the stage for the arrival of two iconic Crusaders in the early 1990's: Brother Ben Baer and Tom Powers.

Brother Ben worked to reverse the negative feelings that accompanied that last years of the Christian Brothers association with the school by bringing enthusiasm, humor, positivity, and a sense of Christian love to the school every day. His impact was immediate as the school developed a tangible sense of a Christian community. With Tom Powers being named executive director in 1992, the students knew the game had changed. Despite some semi-revolts due to the tightening of student conduct rules, it was clear that the raucous days of the 1980's were in the past, and a school proudly reclaimed its Catholic Identity and high academic standards. According to Alexander, who now serves as Resource

Teacher, Librarian, International Exchange Student Coordinator and Accreditation Chair, O'Toole and her team really deserve kudos for reigning in the student behavior years prior. The stories of the behavior of students and the lack of a Catholic mission were far from the state of affairs during the school's first thirty years of existence, when it was proclaimed that the school's mission was to exist for the Greater Glory of God. The fact that religious brothers and sisters' disappearance from the school occurred during this same time period is not a coincidence.

The consolidation of what has turned out to be all of the Catholic schools in Muskegon to one location at the Muskegon Catholic Central site is the result of a long history of school openings, closings, moving and changing. Following the centralization of the three high schools into Muskegon Catholic Central in 1953, a long series of events led to the current situation, where there is one consolidated school for pre-school through 12th grade on the original Muskegon Catholic Central campus. In 1969, St. Mary's Elementary and St. Joseph's Elementary agreed to consolidate. In 1971, St. Jean's Elementary, along with St. Mary's and St. Joseph's, entered into a corporate venture by establishing Holy Trinity School at St. Jean's facility. Also in the same year, Our Lady of Grace Elementary was renamed Father Marquette School and St. Francis De Sales was renamed to Norton Catholic. In 1976, Holy Trinity closed, and its students moved to St. Michael's, Father Marquette or Norton Catholic School. In 1976, St. Michael's closed its 7th and 8th grades and Muskegon Catholic Central moved them into the

“new” wing of the high school, so proudly built in 1966 but now empty enough to house two additional grades.

In 2005, Greater Muskegon Catholic Schools asked for and was given its independence from the Diocese of Grand Rapids in a formal agreement. The school has operated since then as an Independent Catholic School. In the following spring of 2006, the school announced a shocking and crippling internal embezzlement, and the school was forced to assume massive cost-saving measures to continue operations, most notably the closing of St. Michael’s School which was absorbed by St. Francis De Sales, which was then renamed Muskegon Catholic Central Elementary School. Staff cuts and pay freezes led to a general feeling of dread and inevitable closure during this time. Hope returned in grand fashion in April of 2007, as long-time supporters Jim and Leah Rae Morse gave \$5 million dollars to Muskegon Catholic in the form of a five-year matching gift. This gift is lauded as the largest gift in the history of Muskegon County, and has grown into a scholarship endowment of nearly \$10,000,000.00. This fund, which is (wisely) heavily restricted, provides approximately \$500,000 in annual scholarships for nearly half of the current school families. It is a common assumption that the school would not have survived the effects of the embezzlement had it not been for the generous and tremendous support of donors, most notably this large endowment gift.

In 2009, following the Great Recession, Muskegon Catholic Elementary was moved to the Laketon campus saving the school \$250,000 per year. In 2011,

a dramatic 5 year Strategic Plan was adopted, highlighted by a new virtual network for the school, high-end technology for teachers, netbook wireless computers for all students in grades 7-12, moving the 7th and 8th grade to the high school end of the building, and the merger of the School Board and the Foundation Board into one entity. The school name was also officially changed to Muskegon Catholic Central. The primary goal of the plan was to ensure the school's viability for the next twenty years. The top academic goal was to focus on ACT test scores and to achieve the highest scores in the county, which the school reached in each of the first two years of the plan. The school also balanced its budget for a four years and counting time period, and paid off much of its long-term debt to put the school in its best financial position in a long, long time.

In the current school year, the school success in terms of the Strategic Plan goals has been aided by a surprising show of support from the offices of the diocese in nearby Grand Rapids: a new bishop was named who had a history of clear support for Catholic Schools. Bishop David Walkowiak from the Diocese of Cleveland came to Grand Rapids as Bishop in the spring of 2013, and was promptly visited by Muskegon Catholic Central's Head of School, Robert Bridges. That day, the bishop accepted an invitation to be the keynote speaker for a special donor breakfast at the school the following fall. At the breakfast, he spoke with clear passion for Catholic Schools, including the statement, "This is a Christian Community. Everything we do here is enveloped in faith. It is like breathing the air around us and that is a great gift." The reception for Bishop

Walkowiak was overwhelming, and hundreds of school supporters gathered in the school's gym with the students for an all-school Mass, which was celebrated by Bishop Walkowiak and several local priests. The presence of Bishop Walkowiak was especially welcomed by the school's veteran alumni, as his presence harkened back to the school's roots, when the presence of the local bishop was a common occurrence. Prior to the arrival of Bishop Walkowiak, the relationship between the school and the diocesan office was not very positive, and can fairly be described as acrimonious. This all set the stage for the warmth which enveloped the new bishop upon his visit. He again accepted an invitation to celebrate Mass at the school during Catholic School's Week on January 31st, 2014. Again, hundreds of alumni and friends of the school joined the student body for an all-school Mass. The Bishop stayed and visited with the community for nearly two hours afterwards, and spoke of a "genuine warmth and a special feeling" at the school. (D. Walkowiak, personal communication, January 31, 2014). The number of photo opportunities featuring grandparents and current students with the bishop again gave testament to the long-overdue feelings of love and acceptance for support from the bishop's chair. To the pleasant surprise of the school community, Bishop Walkowiak is scheduled to visit twice more this school year - once for Baccalaureate Mass and again for graduation. With the support of this bishop and the world-wide excitement and energy from Pope Francis, there is genuinely good reason to be hopeful for renewed support for the Catholic Schools of Muskegon and the Diocese of Grand Rapids.

It is common to see alumni from throughout the sixty year history of Muskegon Catholic who are still present today, either as an employee, grandparent, volunteer or supporter (and sometimes all four!). There is not any real data, but compared to similar schools, there seems to be a higher percentage of involvement at this school. One such example is Barb (Kolenic) Antekeier, a graduate in 1977, who married a fellow graduate and high school sweetheart, and who still toils for the school as a lead administrative assistant. Here is what Barb shared when asked about special memories of the history of MCC: “When people speak of school traditions, often they reference memories of athletics or the arts, spirit weeks or school songs... but for my family, the tradition of Muskegon Catholic Central is much more. It is not simply moments we look back on with fondness, but an ingrained part of our history. It began when the doors opened, and my mother-in-law became part of the very first class of MCC, Class of 1953-54. It continued when I attended the school myself and was introduced, not only to a rigorous education, but to the man who would become my future husband. And, together, we watched MCC prepare our two daughters for their futures, just as it did ours. Muskegon Catholic Central isn't just our alma mater, but the vehicle that, in many cases, built and reinforced our values of faith, hope, love and, of course, education. Those values brought me back to MCC for my career and, as I continue to contribute to its success, I look forward to watching it shape students for their own.” (B. Antekeier, personal communication, February 14, 2014).

Henry Salisz, who was quoted earlier, has been employed by the school for 58 of the school's 60 years, as business manager, basketball coach, attendance officer, buildings and grounds supervisor, maintenance supervisor, shop teacher, science teacher, and mechanical and architectural drafting instructor. As one could imagine, he is a walking historian for the school. His presence alone has been a vital part of the school's history, but there is more. Henry is an accomplished woodworker, and his list of hand-made projects for the school and surrounding parishes include 320 individual "airplane desks" for area elementary schools, 803 bookcases used throughout the school, 26 altars for the area parishes, current bookcase projects and too many shelves, frames, and other projects to count. A common story about Henry and the school is that he was walking around one day, and stopped for a moment, and they built the school around him. He has been an official or unofficial consultant on every major renovation throughout the school's history. To hear Henry tell it, "I either gave my opinion or was asked, but that doesn't mean I was listened to. In 1975, St. Michael's and Stan Tyler wanted to build (Fr.) Sikorski Baseball Field. The thought was that since we already had a sprinkler system, they could branch off of it to supply water for the new field. I told them, 'No way. There isn't enough water.' So they went with their own cheap vendor, and I told them there was 200 pounds of pressure, and that it would blow off the ends. Sure enough, that is exactly what happened. Ron said, 'Henry, why are you always in my ear?' And I said, 'Because you are always screwing up!' You have to believe in God here, because we have screwed up so many

projects and it all ends up working out!” (H. Salisz, personal communication, February 11, 2014).

For the Mullally family, the driving memory from the early years of Muskegon Catholic was of passionate and unwavering support from the pulpit. “If there is one major difference from now to then,” according to John Mullally, “it is the vocal support that you would hear in Sunday Mass. Fr. Stratz at St. Joe’s would give his annual ‘summer sermon,’ as we called it, where he would say that if you were Catholic, there was only one school you should be in, and that was Muskegon Catholic. I remember that from the time I was six years old. That was as steady as Eddy could get” (J. Mullally, personal communication, February 25, 2014).

Another story amplifies the difference, in the Mullally family mind, of the role of the clergy ‘back then’ to today. “In June of 1957, I (Jim) was graduating from Muskegon Catholic and my brother Mart was graduating from Notre Dame, at about the same time. Fr. Zerfus, who was very close to our family, flew my parents to South Bend and then to Muskegon so they could attend both ceremonies. There was just a different mind-set for priests then” (J. Mullally and J. Mullally, personal communication, February 25, 2014).

Another favorite story of the Mullally brothers occurred the previous fall, following the annual Homecoming football game. The Governor of Michigan, G. Mennen Williams (known as “Soapy”), showed up at 9:00 p.m. and went into the school gym and called a square dance for the student body. Many of the students

did not even know how to square dance, but it did not even matter. It was a campaign year, and the politician always kicked off their campaigns in Muskegon, with the Democrats holding a Labor Day event at the Doo Drop Inn, a local eatery. Soapy Williams ordering the Crusader student body to “swing their partners round and round” is definitely a special memory in Crusader lore.

A final anecdote summarizes the major difference between Catholic schools of today and those that existed in 1953. The priests were active recruiters for the schools, and felt a real sense of ownership and responsibility for the. According to the Jim Mullally; “My wife was five years younger than me and was enrolled at Mona Shores Public School. On Sunday night, her family received a knock at their door, and there was our priest. who said ‘I would like to speak to you and your parents.’ An hour later, she was enrolled at Muskegon Catholic” (J. Mullally, personal communication, February 25, 2014).

Muskegon Catholic Central has been through its share of trials and during its sixty-year existence. The efforts of today’s staff mirror the efforts of the staff in 1953 and beyond. According to one supporter, school staff were traditionally paid “half pay and half love”. In 2014, the staff is still paid similarly, but nearly all profess a love for their work which is beyond compare. The value of a school staff that recognizes the presence of God in their everyday work is hard to quantify, but it has carried people over the years. Many teachers and staff members started their careers at Muskegon Catholic and moved on, while others came and never left. Peg Alexander recalled during a particular event, when flags

were being hung in the main stairwell lobby to recognize Muskegon Catholic Central's exchange students that year. "Counselor Bill Bernhardt bought four international flags and a United States flag and hung them on a chain across the ceiling. I was coming out of the office as they were putting them up, and all the school leaders came together at that point: Tom Powers, Pat O'Toole, Counselor Bernhardt, Br. Ben - they were all there. As we stood there and looked at those flags, I felt the presence of God. I decided to stay here at MCC. I had been looking at other jobs, but right then and there, I decided to stay. To feel the presence, the wave of God's presence and the sense of God's goodness that was hard to describe. There were all deeply spiritual and good educators in the mid-1990's" (M. Alexander, personal communication, February 26, 2014). Certainly, the presence of God is a gift that has been the vital part of Muskegon Catholic Central, and will hopefully guide it for the next sixty years.

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