

## **Mother Cabrini and Mother Mary Grace "The Dynamic Duo"**

The story begins on July 7, 1946 when Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, prioress of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, was canonized by Pope Pius XII.

Speaking of Saint Frances Cabrini at the canonization Pope Pius pointed to the following:

"Although her constitution was very frail, her spirit was endowed with such singular strength that, knowing the will of God in her regard, she permitted nothing to impede her from accomplishing what seemed beyond the strength of a woman".

Saint Frances Cabrini, the first naturalized U. S. American citizen to be canonized, established as one of her sixty-four institutions, an orphanage in New Orleans. Some of the elder Sisters of Mount Carmel told of seeing Mother Cabrini, this saintly nun, walking the streets of New Orleans apparently searching for children in need of her help.

Mother Mary Grace Danos, of the Sisters of Mount Carmel, must have been inspired by her Sisters' stories and certainly followed with admiration the words of Pope Pius XII because, by her own admission and actions, Mother Mary Grace had great devotion to Saint Frances Cabrini and shared her devotion with the people of Abbeville.

Mother Mary Grace was appointed principal of Mount Carmel in Abbeville on August 15, 1946. Two days later she received a letter from the State Board of Education informing her that the high school section of Mount Carmel, with the present enrollment of twenty-two students, would be closed the day after Labor Day if enrollment did not reach the required number of 50 students. Between August 15th and early September, Mother Mary Grace went door-to-door throughout Vermilion Parish inviting parents to send their children to Mount Carmel. The day after Labor Day the school enrollment stood at 51 students.

The increase in enrollment in high school also brought an increase in the elementary grades. Classes were being held in every available space in the school, and some classes were even being held in the Sisters' convent. With little in savings for a building program, the future looked dim for the addition of new classrooms.

On December 22, 1946, the Feast Day of Saint Frances Cabrini, Mother Mary Grace came upon an article in the Times-Picayune which stated that the government was selling post-World-War-II buildings at a 90% discount. She, accompanied by three men from the parish, set out for Camp Polk where the decision was made to purchase a residence hall for \$60.00.

In a video, made shortly before her death, Mother Mary Grace gives us insight into her deep devotion to and trust in Saint Frances Cabrini. Returning to Abbeville after purchasing the residence hall, she said, "This came on the feast of Mother Cabrini; she's telling us that she will pay this bill. But we have to know her, and the only way we'll get to know her is to buy a statue of her and bring her here." So she spent \$65.00 and ordered a life-size statue of Mother Cabrini. Mother Mary Grace continued, "So she had the

job of taking the rest of the bill. I gave her everything I had." When the statue arrived in Abbeville there was a man at the railroad station who inquired about the package. When told that it was a statue for the school he said he would pay for it. "We kept our \$65.00; we thanked Mother Cabrini and said: That's your first start."

Mother Cabrini was set on a pedestal and given a special place in the entrance of the school and a prayer was said by the students each day for her intercession. The weeks and months ahead were filled with trips to and from Camp Polk as the government building was carefully dismantled, loaded in the truck and brought to Abbeville to be re-constructed into classrooms.

Fund raisers were held: weekly cake bingos, monthly gumbo dinners, seasonal dances and the annual May Festival, which included a very successful raffle, the top prize being a new car donated by a local dealership.

The work on the new building went quickly, and so did the funds. When bills were due and funds were low, Mother Mary Grace would turn the statue of Mother Cabrini to the wall. When she got the money to pay the bill she would thank Mother Cabrini and turn the statue around.

On one occasion, it is told, there was a particular large bill coming due. With little money in the building fund, the statue was turned to the wall and fervent prayers were offered for Mother Cabrini's assistance. Shortly thereafter, right before the due date, a man rang the doorbell at the convent. He told the Sister who answered the door that he wanted to make a donation. He handed her cash in the exact amount needed to cover the bill. Mother Mary Grace paid the bill, thanked Mother Cabrini and turned the statue around. It was a pattern they continued – that when the prayers were answered, Mother Cabrini would be shown to all as the one by whose intercession these prayers were answered.

By September 6, 1947 there were six new classrooms affectionately named "Cabrini Hall."

The school continued to grow in numbers, but had no physical space to expand. In 1951 property was purchased "across the bayou" and plans were begun to build a new school. The goal was, as it was from the beginning, "Catholic education for Vermilion Parish children." In Sister Mary Grace's words, "The future was before us, it was a vision that had to be worked out. Much work had to be done...and the payments had to come in."

Through the hard work of the newly appointed pastor, Monsignor Paul Fusilier, the many financial sacrifices of parents, grandparents and friends, and the continued intercession to God through Mother Cabrini, the vision became a reality.

In September of 1953 the new Mount Carmel opened its doors and welcomed over 400 students.

Today we are faced with the same question that Mother Mary Grace asked in 1946: "How do we make room for the growing needs of our children today and into the future?"

Our answer today is the same as that of many years ago: with trust in God's Providence, we build.

We move forward by looking back. We walk along the path of those who came before us, using their example as our inspiration.

We pray for God's help through the intercession of Saint Frances Cabrini.

We accept this challenge with hopeful determination and generous sacrifices like our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and friends did so successfully over seventy years ago.

Yes, with prayer and sacrifice we can make this vision a reality.