

THE FIRST DECADE: 1964–1974

In November 1963, the Brussels Community of the International Congregation of Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ) were visited by two American businessmen, Messrs Howley and Hewitt, who were then on assignment in Belgium with their families. These two men were soon joined by Colonel Daries. They represented a number of Catholic business and government employee with young families, who worshipped together and whose pastor was Monsieur l'abbé Blondel. The group was seeking a Catholic-based education in English for their children. At that time, there was no English language alternative to the International School of Brussels founded in 1951. The group of parents had been directed to the Soeurs Fidèles Compagnes de Jésus at Institut Montjoie by Monsieur l'abbé Blondel, and it was he who arranged the meeting with Mother Mary Gerard Sinnott FCJ the Mother Superior. She agreed to make enquiries on their behalf.

Long months of discussions and negotiations followed, during which the continued influx of American families into Brussels and the strong interest in the proposed new school convinced the FCJ to proceed with the venture as an annex to their educational activities at Avenue Montjoie. By 8 September 1964, the dream had become a reality. St. John's English-Speaking School opened its doors to 114 students from Grades 1–8, in an eight-classroom facility and six FCJ Sisters.

In 1966, Sister Mary John Shannon FCJ was appointed Principal of St. John's English-Speaking School. As the number of students on roll continued to increase, changes were beginning to appear in the religious background of the teachers and students. As teaching Sisters were recalled for other duties by the congregation, they were replaced by lay staff. The strictly Catholic approach gave way to a more ecumenical one following the teachings of Pope John XXIII who encouraged a sympathetic view toward other Christian denominations, seeking to unite, rather than to divide the Christian world. It was in his honor that the name for the school was chosen.

The question of space was by now an ongoing problem. It was obvious that the original building was insufficient to house the expanding school community. Two adjoining properties (Nos. 213 and 215) on Avenue Winston Churchill, which joined the Montjoie property at the rear, were purchased in 1966 by the FCJ/ ASBL (a non-profit organization), to provide more classrooms. In 1967, the basement of the convent in 211 Avenue Winston Churchill, was opened to the school. However, these solutions were perceived as being temporary and unsatisfactory.

There was, by now, already in existence a thriving and enthusiastic Parent Teacher Association. It was agreed that this group should be reorganized as a Development Committee. Included among the members were Messrs Abel, Devlin, Dodson, Duncan, Easley, Farrell, Floyd, Kloet, Lippert, Mason, Poirier, Venuto and Mother Mary Joseph Pechdimaldji FCJ and Mother Cecilia Gillow FCJ. Their goals were the location of a new site and the planning, construction and financing of a new building. Three external factors were working in their favor. The English-speaking community continued to grow as some 100 American firms entered the Brussels area each year. The headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was moved from France to Belgium causing an influx of military and civilian support personnel also to the Brussels region. About this same time there was a relaxation of rules within the FCJ congregation. The Sisters could now take their summer vacations with their families or in another community. This meant that there was now no

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need to maintain Bella Vista, their summer retreat in Waterloo. To the surprise and gratitude of the Development Committee, the land and buildings were donated to the fledgling school by the FCJ Sisters.

Demolition of the villa and the construction of a suitable school building demanded a huge capital investment, and the Development Committee were faced with many troubling questions in their search for answers. As an annex of Montjoie, St. John's had come under the wing of a long established Belgian educational institution. Its financial demands had been entrusted to the ASBL of the FCJ. Loans made to St. John's had been easily repaid through monies received from tuition fees. However, the huge expense involved in the building program proposed for St. John's was quite another matter. Architects' drawings were requested from a firm in England, which had designed several schools for the FCJ. These were studied by the committee and substantially revised in light of Belgian building standards and the needs of the school. By early 1967, the plans were agreed but BF 35 million, or \$660,000 was required to pay for the project.

The Development Committee in conjunction with the ASBL worked long and hard to find answers. Agreement was finally reached that the FCJ would provide half the capital sum required, and that the companies who were the major employers within the school community would be approached with a scheme whereby they would pre-pay the tuition of their employees' children for four years. If enough companies agreed to this scheme, there would be sufficient funds to begin construction of the first building, to cover operating costs and to repay the loan to the FCJ.

On 9 April 1967, Timothy Dunleavy of ITT committed his company to the pre-payment plan, promising to pay in advance the tuition of 20 dependents of ITT for 4 years. Caterpillar, Clark, Esso, Ford and Procter and Gamble followed with similar commitments. The building fund now stood at 10 million BF. The contributions continued to flow in as the final building and finance plans were approved. On 8 August 1968, the ground was broken at Waterloo for the new venture, and in June 1969 a model classroom was available for the public to view.

On 8 September 1969, the 5th anniversary of the foundation of St. John's as an annex of Institut Montjoie, the new school opened its doors in Waterloo with 420 pupils and 30 teachers, of whom 3 were FCJ sisters. The new St. John's school was a three-story brick building with 17 classrooms, a laboratory, cafeteria, library, nurse's office, faculty room, various offices and beautiful little chapel where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved. There was also a large gymnasium equipped for tennis, volleyball, basketball and an extensive sports field.

The official opening of the new building took place on the weekend of Thanksgiving 28 and 29 November 1969. Friday, 28 November was the Grande Fête des Enfants. A blessing of the premises, followed by an Ecumenical Celebration of the Eucharist, was conducted by the Chaplain from Montjoie, the Rector of the American College at Louvain and the Pastors of the Episcopalian Church and the Anglican Church of Brussels. The celebrations continued into the afternoon and included the showing of the movie *Apollo 2!* On the evening of Saturday, 29 November, despite a heavy and unexpected snowfall, 400 guests were welcomed at St. John's. Among these were several ambassadors, Reverend Mother Mary Gerard Sinnott FCJ, and numerous Belgian and English-speaking friends. Monseigneur Cardinale, the Papal Nuncio to Belgium, presided over the dedication ceremony and blessed a bronze plaque that carried the following inscription:

St. John's English-Speaking School, dedicated November 29th, 1969, on which occasion the Sisters wish to express their appreciation to the American business, the English-speaking Community, and all those whose constant co-operation has made this building possible.

The dedication was followed by speeches, a cocktail party, a performance by the school choir and a tour of the premises. The beautiful new building, designed and financed

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cooperatively by the FCJ, the parents and the multinational firms that had brought them to Brussels, was the culmination of several years of hard work, hope and faith in the future. The role of the ASBL had been pivotal. This group of Sisters FCJ and Belgian community leaders, particularly Monsieur Paul Tyteca, who was the first lay administrator of the ASBL of the FCJ, Monsieur Charles du Fontbaré and Monsieur Charles Lecompte, had taken a special interest in the development of the new English-speaking school. Added to this was the active role of the parents whose efforts, through the PTA, ensured the strong growth and independence of the school as it became an entity in its own right.

There were already enthusiastic parents on the new Advisory Committee of 1969—an outgrowth of the Development Committee—who, inspired by the success of the building campaign, were even now considering the addition of a High School. Notable among these parents were Jack and Kathy Devlin who had arrived in Brussels during the first negotiations for the school and two of whose children had become numbers 32 and 33 on the first list of pupils. Mr. Devlin had served as PTA president, member of the ASBL and had been involved in all major plans regarding the school's future since his arrival. He became a key figure in discussions about the proposed High School. Recognizing the need for advice and counsel, the Advisory Committee decided to look for, and seek assistance from, an established High School in the United States. In December 1970, this search resulted in contact being made with Brother Charles Adams FSC, Principal of St. John's College High School Washington, DC. Before long, Brothers Vincent Brown and Coleman Coogan FSC arrived in Brussels for discussions with the committee. An agreement subsequently signed by both schools provided for assistance from St. John's Washington and the Christian Brothers who administered it, with curriculum planning, staffing and administrative needs. The ground was broken in Waterloo for the building of a new wing to house Grades 9 through 12.

By 1971, facilities were in place for the reception of Grades 9 and 10. Four Christian Brothers (FSC) arrived in the fall of 1971 to ensure a good beginning to the High School. The decision was made to appoint separate principals for the Elementary and High Schools with Sr. Mary John Shannon FCJ as Superintendent overall. Brother Charles Klein FSC took up his appointment as Principal of the High School. Mr. Paul McCarthy, who had joined the faculty in 1966 in the Montjoie days, was appointed Elementary School Principal. With the strong working relationship with St. John's Washington already in place, the important question of accreditation was addressed. It was agreed to seek this through the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. This process normally took place after a new school had had at least one graduating class. Parents were assured that temporary lack of accreditation should not hamper the transfer of credits to other high schools or colleges.

Grade 11 opened in 1972, and Brother Dominic Everett FSC replaced Brother Charles Klein as Principal of the High School. Grade 12 commenced in 1973. The student population had now risen to 700 pupils of various nationalities. A further extension to the High School wing during this year completed the building. In the new wing, there were now a total of 15 classrooms, a library, assembly hall and various offices. In addition, the athletic fields were completed providing full-sized soccer and baseball playing fields.

During 1974, a greatly expanded Elementary School wing was completed with a well-equipped new library, a cafeteria, a large art room and classrooms for special education lessons. As a crowning achievement for this first decade, 11 students, from 6 countries, became the first graduates of St. John's English-Speaking School—the Class of 1974.