

MAY/JUNE 2022 • VOLUME 15 • ISSUE 6

A GIFT FROM YOUR PARISH AND
THE DIOCESE OF MANCHESTER

Parable

JOURNEYING WITH THE SAINTS

Blessed Odoardo
Focherini: Italian
journalist's struggle
against evil
resonates today
Page 6

FEATURE

New Catholic high
school serves
Monadnock Region
Page 14



Child advocate

Shalimar Encarnacion receives Vita et Caritas Award for
helping open doors to underprivileged school children



Our Lady of Mercy Academy



Faculty member Anthony Sully teaches a class on Catholicism.

New Catholic high school serves Monadnock Region

The new Catholic high school serving the Monadnock Region is aptly named Our Lady of Mercy Academy, not only because of its faith formation and educational mission, but also for being a hub of activity for performing corporal works of mercy.

Whether volunteering at a food pantry, shoveling a walk for a neighbor, cleaning up a park, writing letters to nursing home residents or performing myriad other charitable works, students at Keene's first Catholic high school are helping others as they themselves prepare for life after graduation.

"Opening this high school is a hopeful and shining example of the Catholic Church's presence in this area," says Liberty Ebright, dean of students. "We are building a faith community, and there is beautiful unity here."

Long a dream of Catholic parents who live in the southwestern corner of the state, Our Lady of Mercy Academy opened in the fall of 2020 in what had once been a Sisters of Mercy convent and was later converted to parish and other ministerial offices.

St. Joseph Regional School, the elementary and middle school that is a feeder school to the new high school, is located on the same campus of brick buildings along with Parish of the Holy Spirit's St. Bernard Church.

"It's intimate," Ebright says of the 3-story school building. Though classrooms are small and large gatherings take place in St. Joseph Regional School's gymnasium, Our Lady of Mercy Academy can well accommodate its 36 students currently enrolled in grades nine through 11 along with its 11 full- and part-time faculty, many of whom once had careers outside education.

Christopher Smith previously worked in retail and restaurant management before becoming a Catholic school teacher. He now is the principal of both Our Lady of Mercy Academy and St. Joseph

Regional School and would like to increase enrollment to 25 students in each of the four high school grades after a senior class is added next year.

Given the growth both schools have been experiencing, he believes that is a reasonable objective.

"I don't want to say no to anybody who wants a Catholic education," he says.

Tuition for students who entered the academy for the 2021-22 school year is \$7,300, and tuition is locked in from the time a student enters until graduation to allow families to budget. Financial aid is available.

"We want to remain affordable," Smith says.

Mary Grace Nelligan, a parishioner of St. Bernard Church, has two children at Our Lady of Mercy Academy and three at St. Joseph's. She appreciates that the high school provides her children with the "opportunity to grow and be cared for in individual ways that take into account the whole person — spiritually, physically, emotionally, socially and academically."

It's also important to her that they learn about their faith, live it out by performing works of mercy



Student Elice Sodders reads from the pulpit during weekly Mass at St. Bernard Church, which is located on the school campus.



Our Lady of Mercy Academy students Gracein Demers and Elice Sodders work in the laboratory.

and participate in weekly Mass at St. Bernard Church.

"I have a great sense of devotion to my parish," says Francis Cardine, who is a freshman from Swanzey and a parishioner of St. Bernard's. He, like other students, appreciates the opportunity to attend Mass as a school community.

Non-Catholic students also like to attend Mass. "It's a relaxing space where you can just stop and collect yourself," says Melkamu Visser, a freshman from Keene who used to attend public school, adding that the homilies are "very helpful."

Having a high school in Keene has meant a new point of contact between the parish and others in the community. "Our school is approximately 50/50 Catholic and non-Catholic. I see the presence of the school as a way to present the faith to the young people, but also to their parents," says Father Alan Tremblay, pastor of the Parish of the Holy Spirit. "Since opening, there have been several students who have either taken an active interest in our faith or expressed a desire to become Catholic. Our school has become a bridge of sorts."

Our Lady of Mercy Academy students come from throughout the Keene area; the closest other Catholic high schools are in Concord, which is about an hour's drive away, and in Brattleboro, Vt., which is about a 30-minute trip.

In a time of growing skepticism and agnosticism, we are presenting the faith...We are a school that is positioned to have its roots in the present social and cultural context and not one with a long history that is needing to adjust to fit the times. These times we are in, in many ways, define this school. I like to call our school an evangelizing school.

— FATHER ALAN TREMBLAY, PARISH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, PASTOR

"Our Lady of Mercy Academy is unique simply in the timing of its opening," Father Tremblay says; it opened during the pandemic.

"In an age of school closures, we are opening and growing. In a time of growing skepticism and agnosticism, we are presenting the faith," he says. "This speaks to me of the real need for a Catholic high school in this area. We are a school that is positioned to have its roots in the present social and cultural context and not one with a long history that is needing to adjust to fit the times. These times we are in, in many ways, define this school. I like to call our school an evangelizing school."

Many Our Lady of Mercy students play on their hometown public schools' sports teams or dance in local groups, bringing the values nurtured at the academy to athletic

fields, gyms and studios where they have friends.

Our Lady of Mercy offers "rigorous academics with a high level of expectation that all students be actively engaged in the academic process," says Ebright. "By and large, families are looking for a college-prep environment," she explains. And while many of the school's graduates plan to go on to college, Ebright emphasizes that she and her faculty "believe in a multitude of post-secondary pathways...that lead to a faith-filled life," including 4-year college, 2-year college, vocational training and military service.

No matter what pathway the students ultimately take, the hope is that their experience at Our Lady of Mercy will make them lifelong imitators of the school's patron, working selflessly in the service of others. ■