

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See the report of the Fair, Boston, Dec. XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

The Sisters of Notre Dame in Chelsea, MA

St. Rose's Church
Chelsea, MA



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—Like so many other communities in Massachusetts during the mid and late 19th century, Chelsea saw a significant increase in Catholic immigrants, especially from Ireland. Before 1850, there were only a few Catholics in the city. If they wished to attend Mass every week, they either had to travel to East Boston or to Salem. That changed as more and more Irish came to Chelsea, seeking work and a better life. In response to the increasing population, Fr. Charles Smith bought a small house on Cottage Street in 1849, which he converted into a tiny church and rectory. St. Rose of Lima Church was now founded.

As more and more Catholics continued to settle in Chelsea, the church on Cottage Street became too small to handle the increasing call for baptisms and marriages. Finally in 1866, a new St. Rose of Lima Church was completed. In 1867, Fr. James McGlew was named the pastor and he soon saw the need for a parish school. St. Rose's Girls School and Convent was completed in 1871 and the Sisters of Notre Dame were invited to take over the management of the school. St. Rose High School held its first graduation for three young women in 1877.

With the success of St. Rose's girls' school, Fr. McGlew thought that a boy's school should follow, but it took until 1889 before one could be completed. Such delays between the opening of a girls' parochial school and one for boys was fairly common during those years because women religious were usually the teachers at parochial schools. The culture and traditions of those religious congregations prompted them toward the education of girls over boys, especially since boys' schools were often run by religious brothers or priests. Quite simply there were more women religious than male religious in the U.S. and as was common then, women teachers—especially nuns—cost significantly less than male teachers. In addition to education for girls, women religious also provided other services for immigrant women whose lives were often marred by poverty, illness and domestic violence. When the Sisters of Notre Dame came to Massachusetts, they saw the desperate circumstances many women faced. One of their first attempts to address their needs—beyond the schools for girls—was to provide a Night School for working girls and women in Boston, as well as an Industrial School in 1858 to give these young women better employment opportunities. In response to their outreach, many recent immigrants entered the Sisters of Notre Dame during those years.

While the Sisters of Notre Dame's foundation had been based on the education of girls, their rules and constitution did not expressly forbid the teaching of boys. However, the Mother Superior and the Eastern Provincial Sr. Louise Van Der Schrieck was opposed to any change in their traditions. When Sister Louise died in 1886, Sr. Julia McGroarty was named the next Eastern Provincial. As it became apparent that a St. Rose's boys' school would be opening in Chelsea, the Sisters of Notre Dame announced their intention of withdrawing from the parish. Sr. Julia McGroarty wrote to the Chelsea sisters in May of 1888, "We do not refuse to take boys because it is contrary to our rule, it says nothing on the subject, but because dear Sister Superior [Louise] decided that it would be bad for our spirit to take parochial schools for boys."

By this time the Sisters of Notre Dame had been at St. Rose's School for 18 years. During those years, they had received many donations in goods and money to their community and to the convent chapel. These gifts had been made specifically to

the sisters and not the parish. Despite that, Fr. McGlew announced that anything in the convent belonged to the parish, not to the Sisters of Notre Dame.

Sr. Julia McGroarty was forced into negotiations with Fr. McGlew to claim items she and all the sisters knew belonged to their order. When he refused to budge, she appealed to Archbishop Williams, during which she laid out her case. Step by step she outlined the history of the Congregation's founding, that *"all subjects and all monies that we possess are in the hands of the Superior General to be used by her for the well-being of all the houses, wherever they may be situated, so that none of the members may ever be in need of the necessities of life."* She then reviewed their history in Massachusetts, that they had always served in parishes through invitation only, that unlike the European sisters, the American sisters had no income, and that any small stipend the parish gave to the sisters was voluntary. This often required the sisters to raise money for their own needs or for the convent by giving music lessons. She informed the archbishop of the debts the Sisters in Massachusetts had for the construction of their convents and schools: \$21,000 in Lowell and \$25,000 in Roxbury. And then after laying out how little money the sisters survived on, she stated, in a masterful stroke that, *"It seems hard, and rather late, when they are dismissing us, to prevent our disposing of articles they did not prevent our purchasing. They must've remarked these objects, in the Chapel, for instance; they knew we could not have lived on our salary and provide extras. Where then did all these things come from? Assuredly from presents from relatives or friends. If they were intended for the parish, would not something have been said to the Pastors?"*

After many letters and meetings, Sr. Julia met with the Vicar General for the Archdiocese where he refused to take a position on their appeal. He did tell her the Sisters could remove any sacred vessels that were bought with their money, but nothing that had been received as a gift in order to avoid scandal. She made it known that she would only do that under protest and in order to avoid another situation as what happened in Chelsea, she instructed the sisters in the future to spend *"as little as you can in parish houses."*

St. Rose's Schools, both for girls and boys, were taken over by the Sisters of Providence in 1889.

St. Rose's School and Church,
Chelsea
c. 1940



Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Massachusetts Provincial Papers, Sr. Julia McGroarty Letters, 1887-1901. 2015.07.
- ◆ *Discovering Foremothers: Sisters, Society and the American Catholic Experience* by Margaret Susan Thompson. U.S. Catholic Historian, Fall, 1986, pp. 273-290.