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Latest Commission Program Looks at Catholic Higher Education for Women in New Jersey

On March 25, 2000, the New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission presented the latest in its series of programs examining aspects of the history of Catholicism in New Jersey. In this centennial year of the College of Saint Elizabeth at Convent Station, the subject chosen was “Catholic Higher Education for Women in New Jersey.”

The president of the college, Sister Francis Raftery, S.C., welcomed participants to the beautiful campus and bade us feel at home. “We have spent this centennial year,” she said, “probing our roots, our mission and our heritage. Truly God has blessed our work. Our celebrations have filled us with confidence and joy as we enter the new century.”

Father Michael G. Krull, chairman of the Commission’s Public Programs committee, then introduced the keynote speaker, Professor Barbara Bari, chair of the history department at the College of Saint Elizabeth, and an alumna of the school. Her address “Visions and Memories: The College of St. Elizabeth Celebrates 100 Years,” reviewed the founding of the college and highlights of its first century.

When higher education for women began to develop in the late nineteenth century, the Sisters of Charity at Convent Station were in a good position to advance the cause since they had long conducted a highly regarded academy, at which a few students had already taken a postgraduate year.

Alive to the opportunities which higher education might open to women and trusting in the Lord, the community decided to open a four-year college for women. Sisters were sent to universities to obtain advanced degrees, experts were consulted on curriculum and other matters, and new facilities were built. In September 1899, an entering class of six students became the pioneers of the new College of Saint Elizabeth.

Since then the College has responded to succeeding challenges by adding programs of study, both graduate and undergraduate, and by broadening the range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

After a brief break for coffee and continuing discussion, the participants reassembled in the auditorium for the second portion of the day’s program, an examination of the reasons some of the Catholic colleges in the state went co-educational and others did not.

Until the late nineteenth century, single-gender colleges were nearly universal, in part because women had not attended college and in part because college authorities generally thought co-educational facilities would distract both men and women from their educational activities. And, too, some educators argued that some men and some women best reached their potential in a single-gender educational milieu.

But developments in American society during the late nineteenth century and through the twentieth century fostered co-education as the most common organization of institutions of higher education. The entry of women into the professions and the

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increasing complexity of the workplace required higher education for women. Catholic colleges felt the pressures, too, and many gradually opened their doors to co-education.

A panel of five college administrators and historians presented their findings about the movement toward co-education in five four-year Catholic colleges in the state: Caldwell College, College of St. Elizabeth, Georgian Court College (all of which were initially colleges for women) and St. Peter’s College and Seton Hall University (both initially male.) Three — Caldwell, St. Peter’s and Seton Hall — are now fully co-educational.

The College of St. Elizabeth and Georgian Court College still maintain the full-time undergraduate program as entirely female, but their graduate programs and some other activities enroll men. This result stems from decisions made by the institutions as they faced new situations.

St. Peter’s and Seton Hall were the first to take some steps toward co-education. At the former, the pressures for professional training and pre-professional courses led to the establishment of Hudson College Business School in 1932 as an evening division of the college, and women attended classes there from its inception, although they remained a small percentage of the enrollment.

At Seton Hall a similar development took place, in the establishment of an Extension Division in Newark in 1937, offering both undergraduate and graduate courses leading to B.A., B.S. and M.A. degrees. Women registered for all the courses here, as they did in Jersey City and Paterson when the university established Urban Divisions (the new name of the Extension Division) in those cities. Women students in these programs sometimes appeared on the South Orange campus because they had to take one or more courses — usually science laboratory courses — which were available only there.

Thus, by the time the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the formerly all-male schools had taken some tentative steps toward co-education. The College of Saint Elizabeth and Georgian Court were still steadfastly women’s colleges, and Caldwell College was only in its second year. The years of World War II seriously depleted the male student body everywhere. St. Peter’s, indeed, managed to stay open largely because the armed forces established there an accelerated training program for nurses, so that women were instrumental in the college’s remaining open.

After the war the GI Bill supported many GI Joes and GI Janes in pursuit of college degrees, and American society increasingly expected high school graduates to continue on to college. Although the number of women in college greatly increased, women’s colleges at first held their own. But the social upheavals of the 1960s placed great emphasis upon equal rights and equal access to opportunity. Eventually this thinking was applied to college admissions and educational structure.

Revised social thinking alone did not cause the admission of women to formerly all-male colleges. Catholic colleges for men found that graduates of Catholic high schools increasingly went to public colleges because of the higher cost of Catholic colleges; thus the cream of their student pool was being siphoned off. Some of them thought by going co-ed they could elevate the qualifications of their entering classes; and many of them realized that in the post-war world their mission to prepare leaders for both Church and society now included educating women as well as men.

When Hudson College returned to full-time activity after World War II increasing numbers of women enrolled, and by the early 1960s Father Leo McLaughlin, S.J., acting president of St. Peter’s, was actively arguing that full co-education would result in larger and better qualified entering classes. In 1965, under his successor, Father Victor Yanitelli, S.J., the college Trustees voted for full co-education, but starting with a limited number of females.

These general considerations were supplemented by circumstances particular to individual schools. In the case of Seton Hall University, the Urban Divisions in Newark, Jersey City and Paterson were housed in
Recent Publications of Interest Appear in New Jersey History

The Fall/Winter 1999 issue of New Jersey History contains two articles about Catholicism in New Jersey. Elizabeth Milliken, assistant professor of history at Seton Hall University and a member of this Commission, contributed "St. Peter Claver: Race and Catholicism in the Formation of an African-American Parish," (pp. 3-27).

Based both on documentary research and interviews with parishioners, the article examines the foundation of St. Peter Claver parish in Newark and the general atmosphere in which it emerged. The article also provides insight into the role of African-Americans in American Catholicism, and of Catholicism in the lives of African-Americans.

In "Catholic Theology and American Life: The Civil War Pastoral Letters of Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley" (pp. 64-79), Alan Delozier, an archivist at Seton Hall University, finds that the Civil War bishop of Newark guided his overwhelmingly immigrant flock toward good Christian living and toward an understanding of wise church-state relations in a society with whose assumptions they were largely unfamiliar.

Monsignor Giglio Retires

Monsignor Charles J. Giglio, a member of the Commission since its earliest days, has recently retired. Monsignor Giglio is rector of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Camden and long-time executive editor of The Catholic Star-Herald, the newspaper of the Camden diocese.

For the Commission, Monsignor Giglio has served on several special committees over the years. The Commission is very grateful for his services, for his good humor in all circumstances and for his insights. We wish him continued success in all his endeavors.
Meet the Commission

Reverend Christopher Ciccarino grew up in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, the youngest of five sons of Frank and the late Julia Ciccarino. He attended School 1 in Scotch Plains and then Oratory Prep in Summit. During these years he swam in competition for the Nomahegan Swim Club and for the Scotch Plains-Fanwood YMCA.

Later he attended Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, where he worked a great deal with Catholic Campus Ministry, serving as president for three years. He also did his academic work, graduating magna cum laude in 1991, with a double major in history and religion and with a Phi Beta Kappa key.

Reverend Ciccarino began his studies for the priesthood at Immaculate Conception Seminary, Seton Hall University in 1991. In the following year, he began a five-year stint as a student in Rome, earning his bachelor's degree in theology and completing classwork for the licentiate. He will shortly return to Rome for the comprehensive examinations. While in Rome he served as a guide to the archeological excavations beneath the Basilica of St. Peter.

Upon his return from Rome, Reverend Ciccarino served for a year as a priest-secretary to Archbishop McCarrick and is presently parochial vicar at St. Michael's Church in Union, New Jersey. He also works with Rachel's Vineyard, a healing and reconciliation ministry to post-abortive women and men and assists Monsignor William N. Field in the archives at Seton Hall University. In the fall he will begin the Archives Management certificate program at New York University.