

The Teaching Witness of St. Rose Philippine Duchesne
Family Matters: Catholic Culture
By Eddie O'Neill – Posted 1/19/15 at 11:02 AM

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When St. Rose Philippine Duchesne arrived in what is now St. Charles, Mo., she described the place as “the remotest village in the U.S.”

A Sister of the Sacred Heart, Sister Rose arrived from France in 1818 by an invitation from Bishop Louis William Valentine DuBourg, the St. Louis area’s first bishop.

It was here, on these hallowed grounds in St. Charles, that she and several of her sisters established the first free school west of the Mississippi.

Fast-forward nearly 200 years later, and a beautiful life-size statue of St. Rose greeted me as I entered the halls of the Academy of the Sacred Heart grade school, which educates more than 400 youngsters. Children in navy-blue uniforms walked the halls; smiles abounded.

It’s just as St. Rose (whose feast day is Nov. 18) would like it. Her legacy lives on, an apt thing to reflect upon for National Catholic Schools Week 2015, Jan. 25-31.

The great saint once said, “You may dazzle the mind with a thousand brilliant discoveries of natural science; you may open new worlds of knowledge which were never dreamed of before; yet, if you have not developed in the soul of the pupil strong habits of virtue, which will sustain her in the struggle of life, you have not educated her.”

Those smiley faces are just one sign that St. Rose’s presence is still present here. Just down the hall from the principal’s office is a large, modern-looking chapel that keeps a sarcophagus containing her remains.

After a tough first winter, Bishop DuBourg offered St. Rose a chance to move to the “big city,” which is now Florissant, Mo., a suburban St. Louis community of approximately 53,000 people.

As I pulled into the parking lot of Old St. Ferdinand Shrine, I came upon a series of historic buildings. The old parish church sits front and center. On the left is the 1888 schoolhouse, which today serves as the parish hall. On the other side of the church is the original convent of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

My first stop was the church, which was established as a parish in 1789. It is believed to be the oldest standing church of any denomination in all of the 1804 Louisiana Purchase Territory.

I entered through the museum, which displays dozens of historical items that recall the vibrant life of this historic parish. Father Tom Keller, who has served as a member of the board of directors for the shrine for the past seven years, was my tour guide during my visit. Interestingly,

the museum was waiting for the return of a cope (a priestly vestment) stitched by St. Rose for Jesuit Father Pierre DeSmet. It was on loan to the Loyola University Museum of Art in Chicago as part of an exhibit on Jesuit missionaries.

“Although they were not close in age, the two (Father DeSmet and St. Rose) had a deep friendship. Father DeSmet often said his success as a missionary depended on Mother Duchesne’s prayers,” said Father Keller, who is the pastor of Assumption Church in Mattese, Mo. “Mother Duchesne was well known as a seamstress, and she made many vestment sets, although only this cope remains. The black cope was used by Father DeSmet for funeral processions and burial rites.”

To step into the church is to take a step back in time. The dark, wooden pews are well worn. The wood floor echoes with each step in this small, narrow church. Our next visit on the tour was the 1819 covenant, which is also attached to the church. All the buildings here on the shrine grounds are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

As we walked through the ground floor of the convent, Father Keller showed me the schoolroom, complete with lap-style chalkboards. “This classroom would have been used at different times of the week by her boarding students, orphans, Native-American students and local boys for Sunday school,” he said. St. Rose was the moving force for this first school in the United States that served Catholic American-Indian girls and boys.

This saintly woman left the comforts of her native land and came to Missouri to catechize children of all races and creeds. May her fervor to share the Catholic faith — and true, virtuous education — and her humility inspire us to do the same in our own mission fields.

Eddie O’Neill writes from Rolla, Missouri.

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