

Rooftop class photo of seventh grade boys, Ascension School, Manhattan, 1927



## *Brothers & Sisters — Side by Side in the Mission*

*By Steve Sweeny*

There's an appropriateness and a near symmetry to it: across the great nave of St. Patrick's Cathedral the shrines of Elizabeth Seton on the south side and John Baptist de La Salle on the north face each other. Through the charism of their religious families, the people of New York have been gifted with access to faith-filled educational opportunities, very often with the Sisters of Charity and the Brothers of the Christian Schools (the de La Salle Christian Brothers) walking side by side in the same parochial and diocesan schools.

This year the Brothers remember the 300th anniversary of the death of de La Salle, their founder. The Sisters, of course, are in their third century of service in New York. Over these years of grace, the Brothers and Sisters have shared the same commitment to education as the way to touch and improve lives. They have seen the schools as the privileged tool for conveying the Good News. They have shown a special bias for the poor and those bypassed by society's structures. They have found the field for ministry in diverse neighborhoods and in parish after parish. Where there was a need, schools opened, and parishes flourished.

The convent was an essential part of the parish pastoral plan. And for the teeming parishes, often where immigration was burgeoning, there was a concerted effort to get the Brothers "for the boys."

Parishioners were accustomed to find themselves in parishes with "the black caps" and the "ten commandments." The histories of the two communities trace the joint presence of the Sisters and the Brothers in many parochial elementary and high schools and diocesan high schools (the Sisters taught

boys and girls in the early grades and often the Brothers began teaching the boys in the 5th or 6th grade).

Amusing today but part of the culture of the times were the two entrances at many parish schools with "Girls" above one front door and "Boys" over the other. And the Sisters and Brothers moved with the demographics of the New York population from lower New York to upper Eastside and Westside, to the Bronx and Yonkers and, of course, to Staten Island. In more recent times, the Brothers and Sisters even shared a co-institutional high school in Shiremanstown, Pa. Those of us who have been part of New York these past sixty years or so will remember finding the Sisters and Brothers side by side in Holy Name, Ascension, Incarnation, and St. Augustine in Manhattan; St. Mary in Yonkers; St. Raymond in the Bronx; St. Peter in Staten Island; Cardinal Spellman High School; beyond the Archdiocese in St. Gabriel in East Elmhurst; and even Trinity in Shiremanstown.

The College of Mount Saint Vincent and Manhattan College shared with both student bodies an enviable cooperative program for decades. The more distant past found the two communities at the Catholic Protectory, the schools of the Cathedral (old and new), and parish schools too numerous to mention here.

Today, Elizabeth and de La Salle face each other across the Cathedral. We know more importantly that they now both assist together at the Great Eternal Liturgy, and with them, hundreds and hundreds of their sons and daughters who affected and transformed lives with generous service in education.

