



## St. Bonaventure's College Faith and Perseverance in Action

By **Susan Chalker Browne**

The old man moved slowly toward the podium. Dressed in the black suit and white collar of the Irish Christian Brothers, he took his time adjusting the microphone. Before him, the senior high students of St. Bonaventure's College sat expectantly, looking smart in their navy school sweaters and striped ties. Then as Brother Joseph Darcy started speaking, students began to lean forward, elbows on knees, to listen.

At 87 years of age, Brother Darcy's life has been entwined with St. Bonaventure's College for over half of that institution's 151 years. Born in St. John's, Newfoundland, Joseph Darcy entered St. Bon's in 1926. His Grade one class picture can still be found on the first staircase landing. He is the small boy at the end of the row, dressed in a sailor suit. Over the decades Darcy has been a student, teacher, principal and president at St. Bon's. Today's occasion at the school marks the launch of his third book, *Noble to Our View: The Saga of St. Bonaventure's College*.

It is a unique situation; few schools in Canada have been educating students over a span of three centuries. Fewer still have their own dedicated historian and a published book detailing that history.

Brother Darcy told the students,

*From the beginning, St. Bon's has played an important role in the history of Newfoundland. When the Christian Brothers took it over in 1889, they reorganized the entire education system in the colony. At that time, it was felt Newfoundland students could not compete on the international scene. Three or four years later, St. Bon's students proved they could, by passing the University of London entrance exams.*

St. Bonaventure's College first opened in St. John's in 1856, run by Franciscan priests. When the Irish Christian Brothers took it over in 1889, they set it on a course of excellence that continued through the 20th century. The Brothers departed in 1988 and the school continued under the publicly funded Roman Catholic board. Then in 1998, the school board closed St. Bon's, claiming it was old and needed expensive repairs. This followed the disastrous referendum result of the previous year when the people of the province voted to abolish the denominational system of education. It was a very dark time in Newfoundland to be an advocate of Catholic education.

Dr. Michael Bautista remembers well those grim days. As board chair of St. Bon's, he is also the only remaining member of the original board of directors. He recalled the first meeting to discuss the possibility of an independent Roman Catholic school in St. John's. That meeting took place on October 14, 1997 and four people showed up to discuss the idea.

*I knew many people could not make it that night. But I felt the first meeting had to take place. After all, the first step is often the hardest one. Like many parents, I did it for my own family. I really felt we had to make this work for the kids.*

*Sometime along the way, it became clear to me that this was a mission sent to our little contingency committee. We were doing God's work and that was clear in the success we were having in making it work. The religious orders came on board at the beginning. The meetings were going well; the direction, with the exception of the tuition debate, was always forward. People were working together. The expertise was there.*



On September 7, 1999 St. Bonaventure's College reopened its doors to 197 students as a K-9 independent school in the Jesuit tradition. Eight years later, the school has grown to a K-12 institution, with an enrolment of 346 students. Along with the challenges, there have been tremendous achievements. Academic scores as measured through provincial testing are high, and the band and choir programs have seen provincial, national and international success. Beyond that, a quiet spirituality resonates through each school day and is evident in the respect that students show their teachers and each other.

However, the challenges remain and perhaps will always remain. St. Bonaventure's College receives no government funding, not even for textbooks. Tuition costs cover staff salaries only and keeping tuition affordable for most families means lower teacher salaries than the public system. Money for bursaries and capital costs must be fund-raised independently; a tremendous financial burden each year.

Recently a new governance structure has been implemented at St. Bon's. In an effort to make operations more accountable and professional, committee heads now report to the president who reports to the Board of Governors. It is a change that may take some getting used to as the new president of St. Bon's is no longer a Jesuit priest, but a layperson and a woman.

Enter Nina Beresford; energetic, animated and efficient. Dressed in a grey flannel skirt and black jacket, she moves through the main foyer of Mullock Hall with an air of confidence and ease. Kindly, she directs a new student toward the main floor bathrooms while at the same time opening the door to a small closet of a room, explaining how it will be transformed into an archival space, displaying objects of interest from the school's rich history.

Nina Beresford knows she has challenges to face. Since the school reopened in 1999, a Jesuit priest has always occupied the top job. Initially it was Father Winston Rye S.J. and then Father Vernon Boyd S.J. Both men gave unstintingly of their time and talent, but have moved on to new areas within the Jesuit order. Now St. Bon's faces a situation mirrored in many Jesuit schools around the world; there is presently no Jesuit priest available to fill the role of president.

Beresford stated reflectively, as she sat at the conference table in her meticulously neat office,

*It is a big change, but parents and staff have made me feel very welcome. So have the Sisters of Mercy and Presentation. I taught at their schools for years. There has been support from the Christian Brothers through Brother Darcy and support from the Jesuit Order. Fathers Altilia and Creamer now sit on our Board of Governors; plus Father Mike O'Donnell, pastor of St. Pius X Parish and superior of the local Jesuit community.*

During the 1990's, Beresford was assistant principal and then principal of St. Bon's when it was a K-8 school under the old publicly funded Catholic system. Then she and her husband Phil taught in Korea for a number of years. With a Masters Degree in educational administration, Beresford is well qualified to assume the role of president.

"The academic area of the school is not my focus," said Beresford, explaining the role of president. "My focus is to have everything in place so the school can be run efficiently by the staff. I take the policies developed by the Board of Governors and implement them in the school."

Another key role of president is that of spiritual director of the school. As a practicing Catholic, the Jesuit Order is satisfied that Beresford can lead by personal example, by participating in all the main liturgies and running the school in a Catholic manner. She explains,

*We have 8 a.m. Mass in the chapel three times a week celebrated by one of the Jesuit priests from St. Pius X Parish. On the other two days, we have a Communion service led by our Jesuit-in-training here at St. Bon's, Mr. Gerald Ryan, S.J.*

Perhaps the most vital role of president is reaching out and maintaining connections with alumni, stakeholders and benefactors of the school.

With a determined look on her face, Beresford said,

*I really want to establish long term funding, so that we are not racing each year for money to provide bursaries and maintain our facilities. I want to explore areas like corporate donations, endowments and planned giving. Our Catholic people can easily support Catholic education by including St. Bon's when writing their wills.*

Now firmly established as a Jesuit school, St. Bon's is clearly entering a new phase of operation. The road to this point, while often rocky, has also been richly rewarding for all involved. "I realize that I have been given a tremendous privilege to be involved in getting this school off the ground," said Dr. Michael Bautista, thoughtfully. "I step back in amazement at how it all came together; the volunteers, the faculty, the building, the money and the students. It really has been miraculous and I feel honoured to have been part of it."



**Above:** St. Bonaventure's College

**Opposite page:** Brother Joseph Darcy at the launch of his book about St. Bonaventure's College

**Left:** Dr. Michael Bautista, Chair of the Board of Governors, St. Bonaventure's College

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