

# THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

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## 'MIRACLE' WILL REVIVE 6 CATHOLIC SCHOOLS DONATIONS PLANT INNER-CITY SEED, TUITION AID

**Source: Tom Bailey Jr.**

*Staff reporters Mickie Anderson and Bill Dries contributed to this story*

A multimillion-dollar donation will not only renovate and reopen six long-closed, inner-city Roman Catholic schools, it also will ensure needy students can pay tuition, Bishop J. Terry Steib announced Thursday.

"I know a miracle when I see one and this is certainly a miracle," said Dr. Mary McDonald, school superintendent for the Diocese of Memphis.

The "several" donors requested anonymity, she said.

Their gift is untold millions, literally. "They have chosen to say it's a multimillion donation," said McDonald, declining to be more specific. The six elementary schools to be resurrected are:

- St. Augustine, 1169 Kerr, closed in 1995
- Blessed Sacrament, 2568 Hale, closed in 1991
- St. Joseph, 3851 Neely, closed in 1985
- St. John, 2718 Lamar, closed in 1990
- Little Flower, 1666 Jackson, closed in 1985
- Holy Names, 709 Keel, closed in 1969.

Starting with St. Augustine this fall, each school will open gradually.

St. Augustine will offer kindergarten this year, add first grade next year, and keep adding a grade each year until it includes kindergarten through the sixth grade.

Blessed Sacrament and St. Joseph will likely open with kindergarten next year. Holy Names may be the last to reopen since it needs the most renovation, McDonald said.

Some of the schools will eventually be grades K-6, others K-8. When fully operational, each school will have an enrollment capacity of 250 to 400, McDonald said.

About 6,850 students attend the 18 existing Catholic elementary, middle, high and special schools in the diocese, which encompasses West Tennessee.

"This is amazing," McDonald said. "There has been nothing like this anywhere in the country. . . . Some dioceses have reopened a school in an area, but nothing of this magnitude."

She's right, according to the National Catholic Educational Association.

"There are a number of schools being opened and reopened around the country, but I don't think anybody is doing it as aggressively as the Diocese of Memphis," said association president Leonard DeFiore.

"It's a relatively small diocese with 18 schools. To reopen six is a tremendous accomplishment," DeFiore said.

As is the case elsewhere around the nation, the Catholic schools in Memphis's impoverished neighborhoods closed when fewer and fewer families living around them could afford the tuition. Enrollment dropped because of families' inability to pay, DeFiore said.

The tuition assistance - based on a family's ability to pay - is the heart of the big, anonymous gift, McDonald said.

"The renovation and start-up costs are one thing," she said.

"But the heart of the donation is given to the children. The donation will go for financial assistance and scholarships for children and families that need it. If a child chooses to go to one of these schools there will be money available to the child to help get there. . . . That's the miracle."

Tuition at St. Augustine will be \$2,400 a year. The criteria for financial assistance has not been determined yet, but families do not have to be Catholic to be eligible for aid, McDonald said.

For years, Bishop Steib has said the diocese and its schools have to return to the impoverished neighborhoods, McDonald said.

The school system has prayed and hoped for a return, but until now could not find the way. The anonymous donors came forward just a "couple of months ago," she said.

The poorer neighborhoods are the ones that need Catholic schools the most, Steib said.

"These earlier schools have been part of our heritage for many years and they were the foundation upon which all our present schools now rest," Steib said in a press release.

"Today, they can once again serve the needs of children who are seeking a superior education in the Catholic tradition. And they are needed today more than ever."

Asked why the donors wanted to be unknown, McDonald replied with a question: "What is the name of the good Samaritan in the Bible?"

The Bible does not name the good Samaritan.

“Exactly,” McDonald said. “Is that important? Or is it important what we are now still doing: Taking care of those in need.”

Still, McDonald described their donation as “seed money.” As large as the contribution is, more donations are needed.

“We don’t expect this will cover everything,” she said. “But we know what we are doing is the right thing. We hope other people will recognize the value” to the city.

Of course, children in all Memphis neighborhoods are offered a free education through Memphis City Schools.

Asked why she feels a return of Catholic schools to the inner-city could be so beneficial to the children there, McDonald said,

“Catholic schools offer the outstanding academic preparation.

“But more than that, they offer faith-based education. It’s the environment in which education takes place that is the difference.

“It’s God-centered. Strong moral values are taught. Truths are taught. Character development is part of the curriculum.”

Robert Atkins, who attended Father Bertrand Catholic School at St. Augustine from 1946 to 1958, couldn’t agree more.

Now, he says, his seven grandchildren, who range from 3 months to 8 years old, will get the kind of education he had.

“I’m very excited,” he said. “I think the academic excellence is there, and the children grow up learning about their own faith - which you can’t do in public school.”

City School Board member Sara Lewis, who was assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction before being elected to the board, said she’s happy for the Diocese and doesn’t see the reopening of the schools as competition.

“There is a place for Catholic schools in the United States of America,” said Lewis, who remembers all six schools as “viable” institutions in their communities.

Sister Mary Immacula of St. Augustine Catholic Church said reopening the church’s school is “wonderful.”

“We believe there should be Catholic education for the children available, so they can get grounded in their faith.”