News
Q&As



St. Joseph of Carondelet Sr. Teresa Lynch, principal of St. Anne School in Santa Ana, California (Courtesy of Teresa Lynch)



by Brian Winters

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

May 17, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Each day, before the morning sun fully rises over downtown Santa Ana, a Southern California mélange of turn-of-the-20th century architecture and the many familiar features of modern urbanism, St. Joseph of Carondelet Sr. Teresa Lynch prepares herself with a short prayer and an intention for the day ahead. As the principal of St. Anne School, it's become a daily routine that she's passed along to her many students.

Santa Ana is a city of art, a city of murals, and Catholicism looms large. You'll see lingering traces of Catholic iconography hidden on the walls between coffee dens and salons. Portraits of the Virgin Mary feel naturally complemented with depictions of Mexican folk heroes and local vendors. Turn off onto one of the many neighboring residential side streets and you'll see one of many vibrantly colored — and fussily maintained — shrines in front of family homes.

By the time you've taken in all the sights and the beckoning early morning smells of street carts and food trucks, Lynch is already welcoming the first of her students to St. Anne School.

"The children I work with have much to teach me each day," she said, as backpacked students carrying guitars, trumpets and violin cases invariably smile and say hello.

Lynch currently oversees a staff of 12 teachers, aides, counselors and various administrative personnel for 230 students. The hours are long and the challenges are daunting. Still, Lynch remains committed, because "St. Anne is more than a school. It's a family."

Hours later, the sound of *ranchera* or *corrido* rhythms performed by her young students will reverberate through the halls. And despite her 45-plus years of dedication, relentless responsibilities and physical hardships, Lynch still agrees that "This is the best thing I could have ever done."

***GSR*: Congratulations on the recent centennial of the parish. Can you give a little historical background about St. Anne School?**

Lynch: St. Anne Parish celebrated 100 years last September. St. Anne Parish School opened its doors on Sept. 17, 1945, under the leadership of Rev. Christopher J.

Bradley. It was a single-story building of four large classrooms, an office, and two restrooms. From 1947 to 1964, further expansion of the school continued to its present state.



St. Anne School in Santa Ana, California, in seen in November 2023. (Dreamstime/Steven Cukrov)

For decades, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary were entrusted with the administration and teaching at the school. In 2013, Fr. Antonio Flores Lopez petitioned the Sisters of St. Joseph Carondelet to accept the leadership role of educating the children of St. Anne Parish School. And that's where we are today.

You wear a lot of hats — school principal, teacher, decathlon coach, mariachi coordinator — for St. Anne. But you're a sister first. How and when did that happen?

I had an experience of God in the sixth grade. My parents were not much into practicing and certainly not into being churchgoers. One day, I learned that a next-

door neighbor, who was only 18 at the time, was killed in the Vietnam War. It was the first time I had encountered death and it made me question the existence of God. No one I knew could prove that God existed. I felt so depressed about this.

One night around 2 a.m., I got up, knelt in front of the family couch, and prayed. "Mary, help me," I said. At the very moment I finished saying those words, an indescribable sense of peace and love came over me and I felt God's embrace. That is when I told God that I wanted to give him my whole life. And I've never wavered from that for one moment.

And from there, you entered the Salesian Sisters.

Right after high school, I entered the Salesian Sisters in New Jersey and worked in education on the East Coast for several years among Italian immigrants in inner-city areas such as Paterson and Atlantic City. I owe my educational philosophy to the Salesians and have always administered schools according to the Salesian principles taught by St. John Bosco.

I was a Salesian Sister for 19 years until I took a leave of absence to take care of a family member in a crisis. I took a year of discernment while working as an administrator in a large school and felt God calling me to the Sisters of St. Joseph Carondelet charism.

So how did a Salesian Sister from New Jersey find herself in Orange County, California?

One of my dreams was to start a prison dog program and I helped establish the California Institution for Women prison dog program. This program was for women serving life sentences. They learned to train puppies into service dogs for people with disabilities other than blindness. During that time, I remained committed to somehow working in the education field.

Advertisement

I placed résumés both in Los Angeles and Orange counties and told myself that whoever hired me first was where I belonged. The Diocese of Orange called me first and I accepted the principal position at St. Anne School. The funny thing is, two hours later, the pastor of St. Jerome called from Los Angeles.

When I was asked what kind of school I wanted to serve in, I was adamant that I wanted to serve in a poor school with no politics attached to it. And that happened to be St. Anne School. Call it providence.

What do you see as being the most challenging issues that school-aged Catholic students face?

We have noticed more stress-filled students who need counseling to deal with depression.

We have had some homeless situations with some of our students who have lived in a van some nights then in a hotel room and then back to their van because housing is so expensive and unpredictable.

Some students are living in crowded studios with many people, others in converted garages. It's difficult to see.

Despite the adversity, what would you consider to be St. Anne's academic strengths?

Compared to the local public schools, we are doing quite well. More than 50% of our students are above grade level in reading. In math, we still struggle, but we do offer some advanced math classes. I teach two of these classes.

Plus, we have a smart lab on campus where students work collaboratively on science-based projects weekly.

We also have a winning academic decathlon team, which I coach, and St. Anne has tied with the wealthiest schools in Orange County twice in the "Super Quiz" division.

Is there any school program of which you are particularly proud?

I'm proud of our band program for grades 4 through 8, where every student learns a band instrument of their choosing. The offshoot of the band program is our own mariachi band made up of more than 50 students. Students learn to sing or play the trumpet, violin and guitar. Some choose the more traditional *vihuela* or *guitarrón*.

The songs are in Spanish, although we play some of the parts of the Mass in English with the mariachi playing the songs with the younger students acting as vocalists.

The students now have gone to six other churches to perform, raising over $120,000 for tuition assistance. They're remarkably talented and they've become quite popular in our area.

A fundraising video for St. Anne School in Santa Ana, California (YouTube/The Orange Catholic Foundation)

There is a lot of Catholic imagery downtown and in the neighborhoods, particularly representations of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And not surprisingly, St. Anne has a wonderful mural on the campus. Do many of the students find a particular comfort or identity with this?

Oh, yes. When I first came to St. Anne there was an ugly brown wall there that was calling out to have a mural painted on it. I wanted it to be of Our Lady of Guadalupe, as the majority of our students are from Mexico.

I called Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles and asked if they had a muralist who could paint a mural. Two hours later they called back and said that Fabian Debora could do the job. Wonderful!

He had the mural done in two weekends, and now when our students see Our Lady, they see themselves in her smile. Many people come there to take photos, to place flowers, to kneel there, and to pray. It is the perfect gateway into our schoolyard.

What does the future of St. Anne look like?

This coming year, we will join four other Catholic schools in the Santa Ana area who are either underenrolled or financially challenged, to become the Pax Christi Academies. It will have its own executive board made up of wealthy businesspeople and a president.

I believe this is an answer to our prayers and will relieve some of the many pressures and stress of trying to raise money to offset deficit situations in our schools. Bishop Kevin Vann is a huge supporter of this, especially St. Anne School, and has promised that we will not be a school that is closed. I think we will be around for many more years.

Editor's note: *Find lessons and teacher guides at GSR in the Classroom, which shines light on the mission and ministry of Catholic women religious around the world.*