A Brief History

Founded in 1831 by Mother Mary Catherine McAuley, and quickly dubbed "the walking Sisters," the congregation of Roman Catholic women now known as the Sisters of Mercy moved beyond convent walls to walk amid and serve the poor, the sick and the uneducated of their day. Such "secular" work outside the convent was unusual at the time because most communities of women religious were cloistered, working only within convent walls. The availability of these new Sisters of Mercy, to carry the works of mercy to those in need, caused the congregation to spread with unusual rapidity. These were women "capable of combining personal spirituality with a pioneering spirit of initiative and independence," as the American founder Mother Frances Xavier Warde once put it.

In 1843, seven Sisters of Mercy left Ireland for Pittsburgh, the first Mercy Foundation in the United States. In 1846, the educational needs of Irish immigrants and others drew the Sisters of Mercy from Pittsburgh to a pioneer town called Chicago.

Under the guidance of Mother Frances Xavier Warde, for whom the Warde Academic Center at Saint Xavier University is named, five Sisters of Mercy, all under the age of 25, arrived in a diocese that was barely three years old. The first and only group of women religious in Chicago for the next 10 years, the Sisters quickly established St. Francis Xavier Female Academy, the forerunner of Saint Xavier University and Mother McAuley Liberal Arts High School.

Within eight years of their arrival, all but one of the original group of SXU founders had died, most as a result of the nursing care they gave to victims of the epidemic diseases that periodically swept through the city. But other women had joined the Sisters of Mercy, devoting themselves to spreading the Good News of the Gospel by their good example, their prayer, their tireless acts of compassion and hospitality, and their institutional ministries.

Since 1846, Saint Xavier University has benefited from the continuous support of the Sisters of Mercy. The names of the Chicago Mercy pioneers, of Saint Xavier's Sister of Mercy Presidents, and of all the Sisters of Mercy, living and dead, who have served at SXU since its 1956 move to the current Chicago campus are inscribed in the Mercy Heritage Walk leading into McDonough Chapel. These names recall the respect, compassion, hospitality, service and excellence with which the Sisters of Mercy have endowed SXU. Today, together with their lay faculty and staff colleagues, who increasingly and most ably share the responsibility for grounding the teaching and learning mission at Saint Xavier University in its Catholic and Mercy heritage, the Sisters of Mercy continue their mission of serving "the poor, the sick and the uneducated" in the name of Jesus Christ.
SXU Mission and Mercy Identity

Founding Sisters of Mercy

The leadership and vision of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, who began educating girls and young women in Dublin, Ireland in the 1820s, paved the way for succeeding generations of Mercys to establish highly recognized institutions of learning throughout the English-speaking world. Catherine McAuley raised the status of women through education and training, giving them the necessary skills to earn a living and to provide for themselves. Saint Xavier University is a living testament to Catherine's vision, practical wisdom and commitment to excellence.

Practical and realistic, as well as visionary, Catherine McAuley quickly recognized that education and religious instruction, care for the sick, and a merciful response to poverty were needed in places far from Dublin and even beyond Ireland. When asked to send sisters to respond to such needs, she did so as often as possible. The result was the quick spread of the Sisters of Mercy through Ireland, to England, and shortly after Catherine McAuley's death in 1841, to America.

In 1843, Mother Frances Xavier Warde and six sisters braved the Atlantic Ocean to establish the Sisters of Mercy in the United States. This band of pioneers was en route to Pittsburgh, a city that became a well-spring from which the Sisters of Mercy spread to many regions of the young nation. Hidden in the future and certainly beyond Frances Xavier Warde's imagination as she first stepped onto American soil was the fact that by the time of her death in 1884, she would have established over 82 Mercy convents, schools, hospitals, orphanages and other works of mercy in some 20 cities across nine states.

As she and her companions disembarked in New York in December 1843, however, Frances Xavier Warde's attention was fixed on the moment and on those waiting on the dock to meet her and the sisters. Among those present was Bishop William Quarter, recently appointed to the newly created diocese of Chicago. An educator himself, Bishop Quarter wasted no time asking Frances Xavier Warde to send sisters to his frontier diocese to open schools for children and young women. Frances Warde urged patience, but she didn't forget.
Patience and Bishop Quarter's renewed requests brought the Sisters of Mercy to Chicago in 1846. Mother Frances Xavier Warde accompanied the group of five she'd chosen to serve in this western outpost. Among them were Mother Agatha O'Brien, superior; two novices still in training to be Sisters of Mercy; and two young women just joining the community. All were under age 25. Only one -- Agatha, who'd come from Ireland with Frances Warde -- had made her vows. They were young and inexperienced but also zealous and capable.

Within three weeks of their arrival, the first five Sisters of Mercy in Chicago had opened Saint Francis Xavier Academy for Females, named to honor Mother Frances Xavier Warde and her patron, Saint Francis Xavier. Chartered by the state of Illinois on February 27, 1847, the fledgling Academy was granted the power, among other rights, to "confer on such persons as may be considered worthy, such academical or honorary degrees as are usually conferred by similar institutions." It was a charter that would see the institution into an unimagined future.

Though education, including establishment of the first parochial schools, was their first service to Chicago, the Sisters of Mercy were soon engaged in other works of mercy. They visited the sick in their homes and the inmates in the city jail. They nursed in temporary epidemic hospitals and cared for the children orphaned by the waves of cholera and typhoid that swept the city. By 1852, the sisters had built Mercy Hospital and Orphan Asylum, the city's first permanent general hospital. As in Dublin, the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago provided safe shelter for working women or those seeking employment and held night school classes to help laborers become literate and grow in understanding their Catholic faith. From Chicago, Mother Agatha O'Brien and those who succeeded her responded to requests from other dioceses and parishes, sending sisters to other locations in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin.

The Sisters of Mercy Serve Around the World
The original endeavors of Catherine McAuley in Ireland, of Frances Xavier Warde in the United States, and of Agatha O'Brien in Chicago are now carried on by sisters and associates and colleagues in over 40 nations on all the continents except Antarctica. The original House of Mercy on Baggot Street in Dublin is now the International Centre of the Sisters of Mercy, a place that welcomes Mercy-related visitors from all over the world. The original Chicago Sisters of Mercy are now part of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, based in Silver Spring, Maryland, with sisters serving in countries like Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, the Philippines, Belize, Guam, Guyana, Jamaica, Peru and the United States.

Closer to home, their early endeavors in Chicago continue to characterize the Sisters of Mercy and their service in the greater metropolitan area today. Saint Xavier Academy for Females grew and thrived, becoming today's Saint Xavier University and Mother McAuley Liberal Arts High School. Care for orphans segued through the decades, becoming care for physically and mentally handicapped children in the early twentieth century and continuing in a more expanded form at today's Misericordia Home on the far North Side.

More important than the multiple ministries of the Sisters of Mercy, however, or their spread to locations around the world, is the reality that Catherine McAuley's original vision, Frances Xavier Warde's amazing zeal, and Agatha O'Brien's practical generosity are now shared by thousands of Mercy colleagues who take the works of Mercy into the world, offering education, religious instruction, care for the sick and a merciful response to poverty wherever need calls out for justice and compassion.
Several campus sites and architectural features embody aspects of Saint Xavier University's educational mission, Catholic identity and Mercy heritage. These symbols inform, remind and inspire members of the University community, and visitors, about Saint Xavier's long and storied tradition. Their presence captures something of the University's character in stone and metal and glass. Among the more prominent of these sites and symbols are the following.

From its earliest design honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary to the coat of arms shield of today, the Official Seal of Saint Xavier University symbolizes a proud history of Catholic education in Chicago. This seal or shield, designed by Saint Xavier University art department faculty member Sister Mary Solina Hicks, R.S.M., includes:

- A black and white checkerboard and diagonal gold bars from the family coat of arms of Saint Francis Xavier, the Jesuit patron of Mother Frances Xavier Warde, the founder of Saint Xavier University;
- Red and gold bars and a white Jerusalem cross taken from the shield of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas;
- An open book to represent education;
- And the Scripture verse, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), which is the translation of the University's Latin motto "Via, Veritas, Vita."

Saint Xavier University continues to use this seal as a symbol of its Catholic identity and Mercy heritage and its mission of higher education.

This cast iron Academy Bell, located near the main entrance of the Warde Academic Center, began its service to Saint Xavier when it was still located in Chicago's downtown area. Having survived the Chicago Fire of 1871, the Academy bell regularly called the Sisters of Mercy to prayer and to teaching during Saint Xavier's early years as an Academy. Left behind but secretly salvaged by a savvy Sister of Mercy when Saint Xavier moved to 103rd Street, the Academy bell was returned to Saint Xavier University and installed in its current place of honor. It is rung on special occasions, including the University's three annual traditions -- Mercy Day, Founders' Day and Mission Day.

Creating a formal entry to the Smith-Morris Quad, the 49th Street Gateway Arch symbolizes both Saint Xavier's past and its future. The Arch replicates one that stood at the entrance to the Saint Xavier College campus at 49th and Cottage Grove Avenue (1901-1955). Recreated on the Saint Xavier University 103rd Street campus in 2009, the Arch figures prominently in the annual Medallion Ceremony that welcomes new students to the academic community. The 49th Street Gateway Arch is a symbol of Saint Xavier's long history in Chicago and a tribute to all -- students, staff and faculty -- who have played a part in its long service of education.
SXU Mission and Mercy Identity

Depicting a Sister of Mercy and a young female student, the *Sister of Mercy window* located in the east entrance of the Warde Academic Center came to Saint Xavier in 2005. It was a coming that was truly a homecoming. Once, this window graced the Saint Xavier chapel at 49th Street and Cottage Grove. When that building was razed in the late 1950s, the salvaged window started a long but mysterious journey to New Orleans, back to Chicago and finally back to the Sisters of Mercy, who have placed it on permanent loan with the institution that was its first home, Saint Xavier.

This statue, representing the University's patron saint, once stood in the chapel at Saint Xavier's 49th Street and Cottage Grove campus and now dominates the atrium of McDonough Chapel and the Mercy Ministry Center. The parallels between the vocation and ministry of *Saint Francis Xavier*, Spanish Jesuit missionary and educator of the 16th century, and Mother Frances Xavier Warde, Irish Sister of Mercy missionary and educator of the 19th century, are remarkable. Together, they lend their names and inspiration to Saint Xavier University. While Mother Frances' name graces the University's main academic building, Saint Francis' figure reminds all of the University's deeply rooted Catholicism.

*“The Spirit Will Teach You All Things”* is the name of the seven stained-glass windows that loom majestically over the main reading room of the University library. Donated by the late Mayor Richard J. Daley as a tribute to his father, these exquisite windows are an artistic rendering of Saint Xavier's commitment to the liberal arts and sciences. Symbols for the classical *trivium* and *quadrivium* -- grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music -- are embedded in the windows. The Holy Spirit, portrayed as a dove in flight, soars over the whole to signify wisdom, the goal of all learning.

Saint Xavier University commissioned a sculpture of a founding *Sister of Mercy, Frances Xavier Warde, R.S.M.*, by artist Sister Marie Henderson, R.S.M., for dedication on Mission Day 2018. Cast in bronze, this artistic rendering of Frances Xavier Warde reflects her image at 35 years of age, when she and five other pioneering Irish women brought the first Sisters of Mercy to the fledgling city of Chicago in 1846. Mother Frances Xavier Warde (1810-1884), Sisters Agatha O'Brien, novices Vincent McGirr and Gertrude McGirr, and postulants Eliza Corbett and Eva Schmidt are considered the founders of Saint Xavier University. The annals of the Sisters of Mercy note, "It is probable that no woman has lived to whom the church in the United States owes more than it does to Frances Warde."
SXU Mission and Mercy Identity

A statue of Mary, titled "Our Lady" was designed by former chairperson of the Saint Xavier University's Art and Design Department, Linae Frei, '58, and was first dedicated in 1964. The original sculpture was made possible by the generosity of alumni, friends and supporters of Saint Xavier whom underwrote the project by purchasing square inches of land at the west end of the campus lake for $1 each. The first home of "Our Lady" came to be known as Our Lady's Acre.

After 20 years of exposure to the elements, the much-weathered "Our Lady" was restored and refurbished by master craftsman and renowned sculpture conservator Andrej Dajnowski. At that time, it was moved to its current location, by the west entrance in Mary's Circle. This circular plaza that frames the bronze statue contains memorial bricks purchased in memory of loved ones and in tribute to cherished mentors.

The statue welcomes all with her outstretched arms and inviting lap, expressing the Mercy spirit and University core value of hospitality. "Our Lady" beckons all to sit and savor a peaceful pause in their daily activities.

Leading into McDonough Chapel and the Mercy Ministry Center is a walkway composed of pavers inscribed with the names of all the Sisters of Mercy who have served at Saint Xavier since it moved to 103rd Street in 1956. Also included in the Mercy Heritage Walk are the names of the University's namesake, Mother Frances Xavier Warde; the five sisters who established the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago; and all the Sister of Mercy presidents of the Academy-College-University. Of the 172 names in the Mercy Heritage Walk, one-fourth are sisters who are current or retired SXU administrators, faculty and staff.

Along the walkway from the McDonough Chapel to the main entrance of the Warde Academic Center stands the Mercy Rock inscribed with the names and founding dates of the 16 colleges and universities now sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy through the Conference for Mercy Higher Education (CMHE). At the head of the list is Saint Xavier, founded in 1846 and now the oldest Mercy institution of higher education in the world. Installed on campus in 2005, the Mercy Rock honors the historic and continuing educational mission of the Sisters of Mercy at Saint Xavier.

Saint Xavier University proudly proclaims its basic educational philosophy in the form of the Eight Pillars that dominate the main entrance to the Warde Academic Center. Just as they support the entrance canopy, so the liberal arts and sciences support SXU's academic program. In gold letters at the top of each pillar is emblazoned the name of one of the classical liberal arts: the trivium of grammar, logic, rhetoric and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. The eighth pillar boasts the word "wisdom," the intended goal of a Saint Xavier education.
Sisters of Mercy Critical Concerns

The Sisters of Mercy were founded out of a deep concern for assisting the poor; and even today, they focus their ministry on those needs identified as their "critical concerns."

Immigration
We reverence the dignity of each person and believe everyone has the right to a decent home, livelihood, education and healthcare. In the United States we work for just and humane immigration laws, a reduction in deportations that tear families apart, and an end to the detention bed quota. We look at the root causes of immigration, including U.S. policies that contribute to the economic and social conditions that push people to flee their countries, and the global impact of migration through our reality as an international community of women religious.

Nonviolence
We work for peace through prayer, education, and personal and communal practices of nonviolence. We support nuclear disarmament, reduction of arms, and the use of dialogue instead of armed conflict. We work to prevent domestic violence and abuse of women and children, stop human trafficking and reduce violence in our communities. That leads us to advocate for commonsense gun violence prevention legislation, an end to the death penalty, an end to the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, and dialogue with Syria and Iran.

Anti-Racism
We believe racism is an evil affecting us all. We work to mobilize sisters and associates in recognizing and dismantling institutional racism in order to become an anti-racist multicultural community. We advocate for upholding the voting rights of marginalized Americans and for a fair criminal justice system, and point out racism wherever it exists.

Women
We believe that women’s education, health and spirituality need special attention. We continue this mission in our schools, colleges, health-care institutions and spirituality centers. We advocate for equal pay, for services for domestic violence victims, and for the rights of girls and women in especially repressive societies.

Earth
We believe in the need to work toward the sustainability of life and support movements and legislation that secure the fundamental right to water for everyone, and that address climate change. That lead us to examine our own behaviors and policies and to adopt more environmentally sustainable practices. We also advocate against hydrofracking; against mining that impacts indigenous and impoverished communities; for regulations that protect land, air and water; and for national and international agreements that mitigate climate change and ensure support for those most vulnerable to its effects.
Mission Statement
Saint Xavier University, a Catholic institution inspired by the heritage of the Sisters of Mercy, educates men and women to search for truth, to think critically, to communicate effectively and to serve wisely and compassionately in support of human dignity and the common good.

Core Values
Saint Xavier University’s eight Core Values ground and enliven the University's Catholic identity, Mercy heritage and commitment to knowledge for both personal enhancement and social progress.

Respect
Respect moves us to understand the gifts and unique contributions of every person in the University community and to value diverse perspectives.

Excellence
Excellence commits us to challenge ourselves to utilize our God-given gifts -- intellectual, social, physical, spiritual and ethical.

Diversity
Diversity builds a community that fosters a climate that is open and welcoming to diverse people, ideas and perspectives; that promotes a constructive discourse on the nature of diversity; and that engages faculty, staff and students in activities that promote the University's core values.

Compassion
Compassion compels us to stand with and embrace others in their suffering that, together, we may experience God's liberating and healing presence.

Hospitality
Hospitality draws us to do our daily work with a spirit of graciousness that welcomes new ideas and people of all backgrounds and beliefs.

Integrity
Integrity gives us the ability to realize the greater good in our actions and programs and challenges us to look at our work and ourselves holistically and as one united with others across the globe.

Learning for Life
Learning for Life, in the liberal arts tradition, encourages us to pursue knowledge and truth throughout our lives in ways that improve our communities and ourselves and that strengthen our understanding of each other.

Service
Service calls us to use our gifts, talents and abilities to advance the genuine well-being of our community and those we encounter.

University Motto
Recognizing that the search for God and the celebration of God's presence is ubiquitous, the University provides opportunities for those of other faith traditions and those on a personal journey of faith to study, to express, to worship, to celebrate and to discuss their religious beliefs in a climate that is respectful, hospitable and open to all. To summarize, offering the opportunity for higher education within a Catholic and Mercy context, Saint Xavier University honors Jesus Christ whom it recognizes as *Via, Veritas, Vita -- the Way, the Truth and the Life* (Jn. 14:6), the motto of the University inscribed on its coat of arms.