

Rockville Centre diocese looking to Marianist Brothers for plan to 'revitalize' elementary schools



Brother Thomas Cleary, left, president of Chaminade High School, and Bishop John Barres of the Diocese of Rockville Centre on Thursday Credit: Gregory A. Shemitz

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For years, the Marianist Brothers have run Long Island's successful Chaminade High School, while at the same time turning another high school and an elementary school on the verge of closing into thriving institutions.

Now the brothers are going to try to help rescue the entire elementary school system for the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

The diocese announced Thursday evening it is recruiting the brothers to "revitalize" one of the largest school systems on Long Island, which has seen extensive declines in enrollment and repeated school closings.

The brothers will conduct an in-depth study of the schools, and then come up with a plan to revitalize them, the diocese said.

"The Marianists have two centuries of Catholic educational commitment and expertise," Bishop John Barres said, adding that the brothers have "a reputation for academic excellence."

He called the situation in the schools "critical." In the last two decades, the number of students has plummeted by more than half: from 25,414 in 1999 to 11,533 today, according to the diocese. The number of schools has dropped from 53 to 39, with the latest closing [announced](#) just this week.

The "Morning Star Initiative" does not affect the nine Catholic high schools on Long Island, which are doing relatively well, though the diocese closed one of the three high schools it directly runs in 2018.

The effort will be headed by Brother Thomas Cleary, the president of Chaminade. He will be assisted by other members of the religious order. The diocese is also hiring Alvarez & Marsal, a New York City-based global management consulting firm known for transforming educational and other organizations.

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The comprehensive yearlong review will culminate with "an action plan to restore a robust Catholic culture, academic excellence and fiscally sustainable schools," the diocese said.

Cleary will continue as president of all-boys Chaminade during the review and implementation.

Long considered by many parents the "gold standard" for Catholic education on Long Island, the Marianist order's central mission has remained education even while many other orders branched into different works following the 1960s Vatican II reforms. They have run Chaminade in Mineola since 1930.

The diocese said it does not plan to close or consolidate any schools for the coming 2020-21 school year. "This is definitely not a regionalization plan. It's the furthest thing from that," Cleary said in an interview. The plan is "inevitably going to bring changes to our Catholic school system," though the precise nature of those changes is yet to be seen.

"It's going to be really important to recognize that each school has their own unique local identity," Cleary said. "We want every school to know that our goal is to revitalize all the Catholic schools."

This week, the diocese announced the latest closing, saying the K-8 Our Lady of Mercy in Hicksville would shut down in June because of declining enrollment and tuition revenue that forced the local parish and the diocese to subsidize it with some \$3 million since 2013.

Church officials attribute the yearslong drop in enrollment across the diocese partly to the difficulty of parents paying tuition on top of local taxes, plus in recent years a decline in the number of school-age children on Long Island.

"We owe it to our parents, families, teachers, parishes, alumni and communities to provide a robust, evangelizing Catholic education for Long Island children," Barres said.

The review will include on-site visits from the team, who will seek feedback and ideas from students, parents, teachers, administrators, priests, parish leaders, alumni and community supporters, the diocese said.

The overhaul will also include strengthening the diocese's Tomorrow's Hope Foundation, which has provided millions of dollars in scholarship funds to help students attend Catholic schools on Long Island.

At least one Catholic educator said he thought bringing in the Marianists was a good idea.

"Certainly the Marianists love Catholic education," said Brother David Migliorino, principal of St. Anthony's High School in South Huntington, which is run by the Franciscan Brothers. "I think they know what they are doing. I am sure they would work very hard to ensure that every Catholic school ... would thrive."

The Marianists have a strong track record on Long Island.

When the diocese asked them to take over the K-8 St. Martin de Porres School in Uniondale in 2004, it was about to close. Within eight years, enrollment shot up from 120 to 440.

Kellenberg Memorial High School, a coed school in Uniondale, also was near closing when the brothers came in during the 1980s. By 2012, as they marked a quarter-century at the school, Kellenberg was thriving, with enrollment growing from 1,400 to 2,550. The campus also includes a middle school.

For its part, Chaminade's graduate list reads like a "who's who" of notable Long Islanders, including: Rep. Thomas Suozzi (Class of 1980); Alfonse D'Amato, former U.S. senator (1955); Bill O'Reilly, talk show host (1967); Lou Gerstner, former chairman and chief executive of IBM (1959); and Jeffrey Campbell, former chief executive of Burger King (1961).

The Marianist schools have become notable for their refusal to latch on to the latest educational trends, and a proclivity to take against-the-grain actions.

In 2005, the brothers gained national attention when they banned proms at their two high schools because they thought they had become ostentatious displays of wasteful spending and wanton behavior.

The schools also have another notable feature: pet dogs roam the hallways and even classrooms to help create a more friendly, family-oriented environment. Cleary said, laughing, he would not rule out introducing dogs into the diocesan schools if that would help revitalize them.