



**ST. JOSEPH SCHOOL**  
***Providing Quality Education since 1890***

### **St. Joseph School: A History of the First Roman Catholic School in the Windward Islands**

St. Joseph School is the first Roman Catholic school in the Windward Islands. In 1875, Fr. Nieuwenhuis requested the Prioress of Voorschoten, Holland, to send some sisters to St. Maarten to assist with Catholic education. This request was not granted at the time.

Fr. Onderwater later repeated the request, and finally, the Prioress decided to send six sisters to St. Maarten. On April 15, 1890, the sisters left Holland. They were: Sr. Regina, who became the first prioress on St. Maarten and the first school manager of St. Joseph School, Sr. Catharina, Sr. Helena, Sr. Gonzales, Sr. Raymunda, and Sr. Huberta. It took them two and a half weeks to reach St. Kitts by boat. Arriving in the evening, they did not want to spend the night there, so they chartered a schooner and arrived in St. Maarten on May 3, 1890, at 8:30 a.m. at the small pier. A large crowd welcomed them, and six little girls presented them with flowers. This friendly welcome made the sisters feel at home in St. Maarten.

Three years earlier, the parish priest, Fr. Nieuwenhuis, had passed away. He left a sum of money, houses, and a piece of property. One of these houses was specially built for the sisters, and it was large enough to accommodate some classrooms. As a result, the convent and the school were housed in the same building, located at the same spot where the St. Joseph Convent was on Front Street. The convent and the school were blessed and given the name "St. Joseph," under whose protection they were placed.

### **The First School Day**

Monday, June 2, 1890, marked the first school day. The day began with a holy Mass, attended by all the students. After Mass, the students went to their classrooms. They were divided into two sections: paying and non-paying. The school population consisted of 62 children in the kindergarten (all in one classroom), 56 children in the other two classrooms, and 14 in the paying section, totaling 132 students.

Some peculiar difficulties arose during the first morning session. The majority of the children in kindergarten had no idea about discipline, and many were scared of the sisters, who were dressed in a manner unfamiliar to them. There was crying, shouting, fighting, and even climbing through windows. The sisters and the children could not understand each other, with the main problem being the language barrier. Four of the sisters decided to take English lessons from two local ladies. Things began to improve after this.

As the school population grew rapidly, permission was granted to build more classrooms. In 1923, the wooden building next to the St. Joseph Convent was constructed and named St. Mary's Boarding School (Maria Institute). This building served as a boarding school for girls from

neighboring islands who could not receive Catholic education in their country until 1930. After that, it was used as a regular school, namely the St. Joseph School.

### **Expansion and Modernization**

In 1948, a significant part of the wooden building was deemed unsuitable. In 1954 or 1955, the building was condemned by Mr. Tjon Sie Fat, necessitating a new school to accommodate the growing student population.

By 1968, the St. Joseph School was divided into an elementary and a secondary school. Classes were held in various locations, including Backstreet, Cul de Sac, St. John's, and behind Food Center (where Le Grand Marché now stands). At this time, there were 22 classes.

In 1978, the St. Joseph School was split into three schools: the St. Joseph School with 11 classes, the Old Pond Side School (now the Sr. Borgia Primary School) with 6 classes, and the Sr. Magda Primary School with 6 classes.

### **End of an Era and Continued Growth**

In 1984, Sr. Lamberta, who had been the school manager for 16 years, was transferred to Holland, marking the end of the Dutch nuns in the classrooms of the Catholic schools on St. Maarten. For the first time in the school's history, a male was appointed as the school manager, Mr. Frans van Veghel (1984–1988).

In 1988, the St. Joseph School was again split into three schools: the St. Joseph School, the Sr. Marie Laurence Primary School, and the St. Dominic Primary School. Each school had six classes (grades 1 through 6). Mrs. Carmen Bowers-Lake was appointed school manager for the St. Joseph School (1988–2013), Mr. Henri Brookson was appointed school manager for the Sr. Marie Laurence Primary, and Mr. Frans van Veghel served as the school manager of the St. Dominic Primary School.

From 1988 to 2004, the St. Joseph School consisted of six classrooms, covering grades 1–6. In August 2004, two classrooms for 4- and 5-year-olds were added to the St. Joseph School to comply with Foundation-Based Education (FBE). This was the merging of St. Imelda Kindergarten and the St. Joseph School.

In August 2015, the school branched out with a new Individual Education (IE) Group, and in August 2016, the Early Childhood Stimulation group was introduced. The IE Group is now located at the former Sr. Basilia Center above the Risen Christ R.C. Church in South Reward.

The school is aiming to attain “Model School” status by providing a high standard, holistic, literacy-rich learning environment, for students through the integration of Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics (STEAM) within the traditional best practices.