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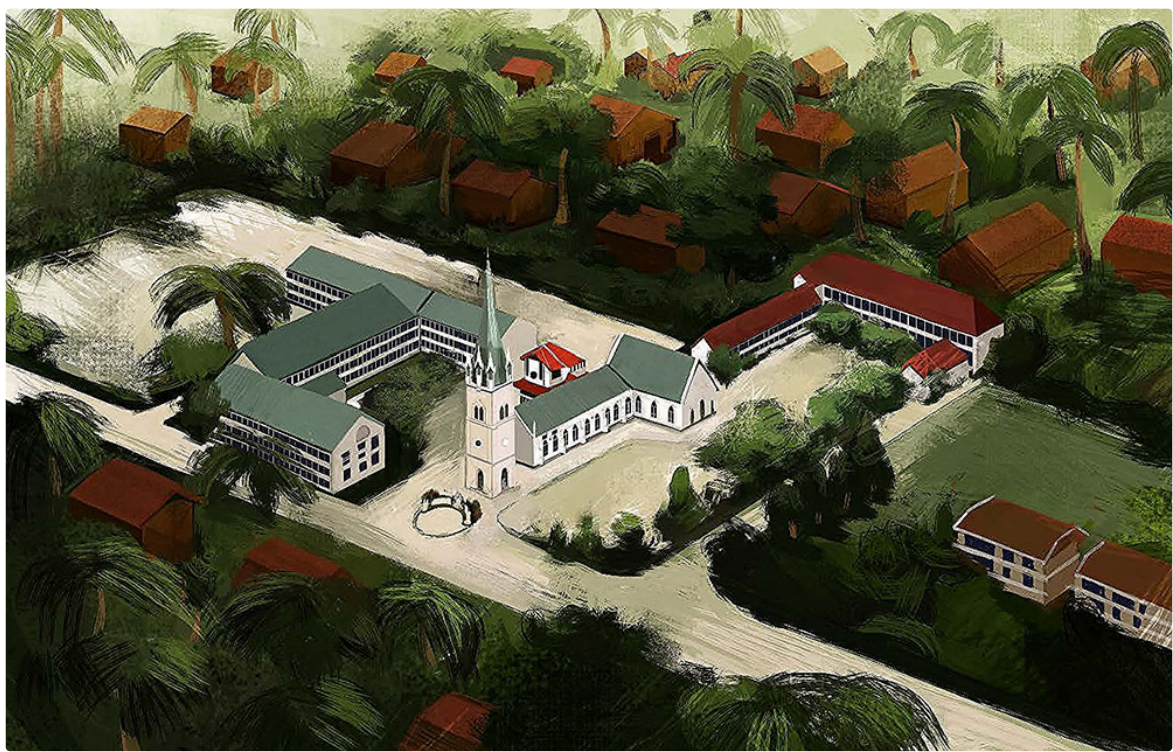
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- HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN
SINGAPORE -
THE VIRTUAL EXHIBITION



THE HISTORY OF MONTFORT BY SHAWN SEAH

Shawn Seah is a local history and heritage author who has written extensively on the Teochew community in Singapore. His latest book published in 2021 is "My Father's Kampung, A History of Aukang and Punggol". His contribution of the following account of the history of Montfort School is based on material featured in his book.



An artist's impression of the view of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Montfort School in historical Aukang.

Montfort started as a single class of students in 1916. The class was taught in English and operated out of a two-storey building next to the Church of the Nativity. It later developed into Holy Innocents' English School, Montfort School's predecessor. Another Chinese class on the lower floor later branched off into a full-fledged school, Holy Innocents' Chinese Boys' School (today known as Holy Innocents' High School). We have Father Henri Duvelle to thank for starting these schools.

In 1920, the new Teochew-speaking Parish Priest, Father Edward Becheras was able to gather 30 students, and he recruited a teacher, Mr Monterio to take charge of them. He also enlisted the help of Mr P A D'Costa as Principal to run the school from 1922 to 1936. Soon, the school started struggling to accommodate the growing number of students. Father Becheras then raised funds and added two blocks to the original building.

The school's growth created management difficulties, which led Bishop Adrien Devals to approach the Brothers of St Gabriel about taking over the school. The Brothers were already running several thriving schools in Siam. The Brothers agreed and in November 1936, Brother Gerard Majella arrived in Singapore. Shortly after, two more Gabrielite Brothers reached Singapore's

shores. The Brothers of St Gabriel officially took over the management of Holy Innocents' English School from the parish in December 1936. Shortly after, World War II began.

When the Japanese Occupation ended in 1945, Brother Louis Gonzaga returned to Singapore and rallied the former teachers. In October, primary classes were restarted at Holy Innocents' English School. In 1957, a new wing was built with two Science laboratories, a school hall, a new canteen, and additional classrooms.

In 1959, Holy Innocents' English School was renamed Montfort School to honour St Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort, whose efforts to educate youths are carried on by the Brothers. Throughout its history, Montfort has produced a range of talented personalities such as former Ministers Lim Boon Heng and Lee Boon Yang, Members of Parliament Ng Kah Ting and Augustine Tan, MINDEF Chief Defence Scientist Quek Tong Boon, Olympic badminton player Derek Wong, Archbishop Emeritus Nicholas Chia and Archbishop William Goh.

Another name that stands out is that of poet Benedict Teo Kah Leng (1909–2001). He was a student of Holy Innocents' English School and returned to serve at his alma mater for 40 years, first as a teacher (he taught GP and Art) and then as Principal of the primary school. He was an excellent role model as a Catholic educator – he attended mass daily, sang in the choir on special occasions, served as lector and warden at Sunday masses and was active in Catholic organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul and St Joseph Dying Aid Association.

The Nativity Church and Montfort school were deeply intertwined. Most of the students who attended Montfort would attend the Nativity Church. One student of Montfort recalled that: "During my time... I wanted very much to be in the band, because that was the only way I could learn and attend sunrise mass at the Church of the Nativity. Those were memorable years."



Artist impression of fun fair at Montfort school.

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