After ninety-eight years of educating young women in the Bronx, Aquinas High School held its final Commencement Exercises on June 10. The Class of 2021 included thirty-seven seniors and nine juniors who took classes last summer to meet graduation requirements a year early.

Julissa Reynoso Pantaleón, a member of the Class of 1993, delivered a virtual commencement address. Reynoso Pantaleón is chief of staff to First Lady Jill Biden and former U.S. ambassador to Uruguay.

Right to the end, Aquinas High School was faithful to its mission: *Educating and inspiring young women for a lifetime of faith, learning, and compassionate action for a more just world.* Legendary for providing an excellent education for young women of the Bronx, Aquinas served the changing immigrant populations that have called the Bronx “home” over the decades.

Aquinas received countless state and national honors over the years and became the first high school in New York City to be named an exemplary school by the U.S. Department of Education in 1985. The Department of Education also named Aquinas as a national Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 2000. In 2002, First Lady Laura Bush visited Aquinas on the first anniversary of 9/11, finding hope for the healing of America in the prayer and action of youth.
The Dominican Sisters of Sparkill purchased an entire block of property in the Belmont section of the Bronx known as Grote Estate, featuring a Victorian mansion and three-story frame house. In September 1923, the Sisters opened Aquinas Hall, a two-year business school, with a first student body of 30 young women.

In 1939, the historic mansion was demolished, and Aquinas High School was constructed. When it opened in September 1939, it welcomed 438 students. Within a decade, enrollment increased to 800 students. To accommodate the growing student body, 1952 saw the construction of an extension, providing 10 additional classrooms, including the unique "round rooms". The harmonious unity of the complex of successively "new" wings was an architectural feat and continues to be an object of admiration today.

The building remains a landmark in the area, representing the finest in Catholic education. “There always was so much life in the building,” said Kris Sherwood, a teacher at the school since 1993. “The building is stunningly beautiful, always so clean and bright. There was something about this building. You walked up to it, and you were hooked to it.” Next year, the building will be home to Cardinal McCloskey Charter School and a Head Start program sponsored by Cardinal McCloskey Community Services.

“Aquinas High School was a home away from home,” said Sister Catherine Rose Quigley O.P., a 1959 Aquinas graduate who served as school principal, 2000-2018, and assistant principal, 1994-2000. “It provided a quality Catholic education for women, adapting to be able to serve its students according to the needs of each particular time in its history.”

Sister Mary Murray, president of the Dominican Sisters of Sparkill, captures the continued bonds of the congregation to the more than 10,000 women who have graduated from Aquinas. “The Dominican Sisters look forward to bringing together alumnae of Aquinas High School to celebrate the school’s legacy in 2023, to mark the 100th anniversary of the opening of their legendary alma mater—a true beacon of faith and hope in the Bronx.”

*Founded in 1923...*
Class of 2021 Commencement Exercises at St. Martin of Tours Church, June 10, 2021.

Aquinites who served at Aquinas High School as teachers, administrators, or School Board members: L-r: Sr. Catherine Rose Quigley, Sr. Grace Hogan, Sr. Margaret Ryan, Sr. Eileen Richard Leavey, Stephanie Carpentieri, Sr. Kathleen O’Connor, and Dr. Mary Anne Evangelist.

Aquinas High School administrators, staff, and members of the School Board and Board of Trustees gathered on June 15 for a final prayer service to mark the closing of Aquinas High School after 98 years of educating young women in the Bronx.