

BEGINNINGS IN QUEBEC

Since we tread along the same way, let us extend a hand to one another, to help surmount the difficulties which present themselves.

—Blessed Marie-Rose Durocher,
foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary,
in a letter to her sister, 11 March 1844

Experience tells us that self-identity is influenced greatly by the decisions and actions of family members who lived before us. The same is true for the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (SNJM) who work in the United States and Ontario, Canada. The work being done by the Sisters and their Associates today is shaped by the Congregation's roots, established in Quebec more than 150 years ago.



Mother Marie-Rose
Oil on canvas, Theophile Hamel (1817-1870), 1849
Courtesy SNJM, Central Archives Department

The Sisters' story began in the 1840s when Eulalie Durocher (1811-1849) and Mélodie Dufresne (1809-1881) earned a reputation for creating a hospitable, smoothly running home for Eulalie's brother, Theophile, a parish priest in the rural Richelieu Valley of Quebec. Although Eulalie herself had little formal education, in her pastoral work she saw the great need for instruction of youth, especially girls. She hoped to enter a religious order but poor health stopped several attempts. Nevertheless, her piety and efforts in the parish attracted the attentions of Ignatius Bourget (1799-1885), Bishop of Montreal. In 1843, Bourget asked Eulalie and Mélodie to



Sister Marie-Agnes
Oil on canvas, Sister Marie Albert, 1894,
from a posthumous photograph

travel to a small school in the village of Longueuil, just across the St. Lawrence River from the island of Montreal, to found a new religious teaching community. Arriving on 28 October 1843, they were greeted by Henriette Céré (1804-

1885), who already lived and taught at the school. Formal education for young women and girls, especially among the less fortunate, was rare in Canada in the early nineteenth century. The new Congregation's first focus was solely on educating young girls. For inspiration, Eulalie, Mélodie and Henriette looked to an order of Sisters in Marseilles, France. Because the French Sisters could not spare anyone to come to Canada to train the novices, the three women crafted a Canadian version of the order and named it the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. On 28 February 1844, Eulalie received the religious name Marie-Rose; Mélodie became known as Marie-Agnes; and Henriette became Marie-Madeleine.

During the 1843-1844 school year the three postulants divided their time between their religious and educational studies and their students. They purchased a new property to accommodate a growing number of students as well as candidates for their community. In August 1844, Sister Marie-Rose led a procession of Sisters, students, and friends from the Foundation House to the much larger convent and boarding school nearby. Among those in the procession were women destined to carry the Holy Names' work thousands of miles from Quebec, including Sister Theresa of Jesus (Salome Martin, 1823-1890) and Sister Veronica of the Crucifix (Hedwidge Davignon, 1820-1903).

Sisters Marie-Rose, Marie-Agnes and Marie-Madeleine made their religious profession in December 1844. Bishop Bourget named Sister Marie-Rose the first superior of the Congregation. Under her leadership,

many new candidates joined; their school grew; and Sisters were sent to open new foundations elsewhere in Quebec. Unfortunately, Mother Marie-Rose's frail health declined and she died on 6 October 1849.

In spite of internal and external challenges, the order that she founded continued to grow. Sister Veronica of the Crucifix was named Superior General in 1849; Sister Theresa of Jesus succeeded her in 1857. The two could not have been more different. Mother Veronica was content to grow the Congregation in Quebec, focusing on the development of a strong educational curriculum. Mother Theresa, on the other hand, was brimming with missionary zeal. When a request for Sisters came from distant Oregon, on the Pacific coast, it was Mother Theresa who took up the challenge, agreeing to send twelve Sisters.

The Oregon foundation was only the first of many to be opened by the Sisters throughout the United States and Canada by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1844, Bishop Bourget had offered this advice to the Sisters: "In union will be your strength. May it be the soul of your little community." It was advice the Congregation took to heart. No matter the distances traveled, no matter the years that pass, the Sisters of the Holy Names have stayed united and true to the ideals and teachings of Blessed Marie-Rose.



Mother Veronica of the Crucifix
Circa 1850



Mother Theresa of Jesus
Circa 1857



Sister Marie-Madeleine
Circa 1850



Foundation House, Sisters of the Holy Names
Longueuil, Quebec, constructed circa 1740