

Mother Mary Ann
Foundress of the Sisters of Saint Ann:
Her Contribution to the Church
in British Columbia, Alaska and the Yukon.

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In a circular letter dated February 22, 1965, Mother Mary Claire des Anges, Superior General of the Sisters of Saint Ann, informed her community that a decree on the writings of Mother Mary Ann, foundress of the Sisters of Saint Ann, had been forwarded from the Sacred Congregation of Rites. The document reads as follows:

Sacred Congregation of Rites
ARCHDIOCESE OF MONTREAL

CAUSE OF BEATIFICATION
AND OF CANONIZATION
of the Servant of God Mary Anne
(*Marie Esther Blondin*)

Foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Ann.

At the request of Very Rev. Father Angelo Mitri, O.M.I., duly constituted Postulator in the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God MARY ANNE (Marie Esther Blondin), Foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Ann, an ordinary assembly of the Sacred Congregation of Rites was convened in the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican on December 15, 1964. At this meeting the Eminent and Very Reverend Bishop Arcadio Marie Larraona, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, Ponent and Reporter of the said cause, proposed the discussion on the revision of the writings of the said Servant of God.

The Most Reverend and Eminent Fathers, appointed Custodians of the Sacred Rites, after having collected the votes of the Prelate Officers (consultants) and seriously considered the matter, judged it opportune to declare that nothing is opposed to continued action hereafter, subject however to the right of the General Promoter of the Faith to object as much as he is entitled to.

All these details having been faithfully reported to His Holiness Paul VI by the undersigned Cardinal, Our Holy Father deigned, on January 5, 1965, to approve and confirm the decision of the Most Eminent Cardinals.

Arcadio Marie Cardinal LARRONA, Prefect of the C.C.R.
† Enrico DANTE, Archbishop of Carpasin
Secretary of the S.C.R.¹

¹ Mother Mary Claire des Anges, S.S.A., Circular Letter, Number 9, page 101, February 22, 1965.

This first official pronouncement from Rome, received seventy-five years after the death of Mother Mary Ann, marks an important step in the advancement of her beatification. It is a public testimony that her cause has been formally introduced.

More than one hundred fifty postulatory letters were addressed to the Sovereign Pontiff by distinguished ecclesiastic and lay leaders, requesting him to undertake the cause of this Canadian-born foundress.² These letters constitute an important testimony on the mission accomplished by Mother Mary Ann.

Typical of the sentiments expressed in these written statements are those of E. Davie Fulton, Q.C.:

Through the biographies, essays and treatises which have been published on her life, I have admired her faith, her unshakeable confidence in Divine Providence, her profound charity and humility, her perfect obedience and acceptance of rulings otherwise agonizing, and the total dedication of her life and governance of her conduct in accordance with the rules of the congregation which she founded.

Her heroic virtue and her qualities of sanctity seem to be well established by the inspiration that they have furnished to the members of her congregation, who have in turn performed heroic and dedicated service in so many fields in our country.³

Marie Esther Sureau dit Blondin, the child who was to become Mother Mary Ann, was born on April 18, 1809, at Terrebonne, Quebec, about fifteen miles northeast of Montreal. She was the third in a family of twelve. Her father, John Baptist dit Blondin, was a farmer imbued with a strong faith and dauntless courage. Her mother, Marie Rose Limoges, a woman of sincere piety, fostered among her children a trust in Divine Providence and a love for the Blessed Eucharist. She inculcated, too, a spirit of compassion for those afflicted by suffering or sorrow.⁴

Three miles above the village of Terrebonne, on the edge of the Thousand Island River is the site of the Blondin farm.⁵ Here, Marie Esther, the future foundress destined to endow the Church in Canada with a new religious community, grew up in a truly Christian home where religion, toil and sacrifice were held in honour.

In early childhood, Marie Esther displayed a resolute will and decided tenacity.⁶ At four she surprised the household by reciting the long formula of the

² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³ E. Davie Fulton, Letter to Pope Paul VI, December 17, 1964.

⁴ Rev. Aristide Brien, "Memoir of Mother Mary Ann," cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., trans. *Martyr of Silence* by Eugene Nadeau, O.M.I. (Montreal, 1956), p. 9.

An incident is related of Marie Esther's being stirred by pity at the sight of a poor beggar. The little girl ran to meet the unfortunate man, assisted him up the stairs and bathed his face. When she went to get him some food, she was unable to find him on her return. No one in the neighbourhood recalled seeing the stranger.

⁵ The property, marked by a commemorative plaque, was purchased by the Sisters of Saint Ann in 1963.

⁶ Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Disappointed at having been left behind by her elder sister on a boating trip, Marie Esther resolutely waded into the river after the boat. Though carried beyond

family's evening prayers. In early adolescence, the young girl experienced a period of moral anguish and distress.⁷ Grave and pensive, she gave herself to prayer, mortification and penitential practices. Though the childhood of Mother Mary Ann was spent in a home blessed with human joys, it was not a period of unalloyed happiness or unbroken peace of soul.

Because of the educational depression which afflicted Quebec after the fall of the French régime,⁸ Marie Esther Blondin, in common with her compatriots, suffered from illiteracy.⁹ At the age of twenty, the future foundress could neither read nor write. In 1829 she finally had the opportunity for study when she entered the service of the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame at Terrebonne in return for lessons in reading and writing.¹⁰ Two years later, at the age of twenty-two, Marie Esther enrolled as a resident student in the same boarding school. Although her academic record was very average, her constant docility and diligent application were an inspiration to her classmates.¹¹

Early in 1832, Marie Esther left her teachers to enter the novitiate of the Congregation of Notre Dame. The young candidate had no difficulty in submitting to the religious rule.¹² The life of prayer and recollection and of organized community living satisfied her desires. As a novice, however, Marie Esther, now

her depth, the little girl, kept afloat on her inflated skirts, calmly allowed herself to drift with the current until she was rescued.

⁷ Rev. Henri Samson, S. J., "Manuscript Study," 1955, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

The Jesuit psychiatrist believes this phase of insecurity and moral disquietude can be attributed to "psychological uneasiness, probably due to insufficient knowledge of the physiological aspects of life to a certain moral rigorism and to ascetical practices too severe for her age."

⁸ Sister Mary Ann Eva, S.S.A., trans. *A History of the Sisters of Saint Ann* by Sister Mary Jean de Patmos, S.S.A. (New York, 1961), Introduction.

Education in Quebec suffered an interval of depression for almost ninety years after the capitulation of France in Canada in 1763. Because of racial and religious differences, many French-Canadian children did not attend the schools conducted by the Royal Institution. Though a few schools of the French régime survived, they were far from adequate in number. As a result of this crisis in public education, there was a high rate of illiteracy. It was not until 1846 that education in the Province of Quebec obtained its magna carta through the Law of Denominational Schools.

⁹ Rev. Lionel Groulx, *L'Enseignement Français au Canada*, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 15.

In calculating the rate of illiteracy in 1789, Father Groulx arrives at the fraction twenty-three twenty-fourths of the population. The statistics of 1825 show little change.

¹⁰ Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 18.

There is an unsigned entry in the account book, found in the convent archives at Terrebonne, regarding the wages paid to the employee, Marie Esther Blondin. It reads, "Since January 21, 1830, I give her only six pounds ("chelins") a month, but I teach her; that is, I have promised to show her how to read."

¹¹ Rev. Aristide Brien, "Memoir of Mother Mary Ann," cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Sister Christine, became ill and, to her regret, was obliged to return to her home. Her naturally delicate health had eventually been undermined by her excessive self-imposed mortifications.¹³

After a period of recuperation at home in 1833, Marie Esther regained her health. Wishing to devote herself to the education of children, the former novice (who chose to retain her religious name, Christine) joined Miss Suzanne Pineault, directress of the independent village school in Vaudreuil, a historic little settlement twenty-four miles west of Montreal. For six years, the two young women worked together with efficiency and devotedness to the great satisfaction of the pastor, Reverend Paul Loup Archambeault.¹⁴

In 1839, direction of the girls' academy was assigned to Christine, when Miss Pineault moved to a neighbouring parish. The transfer did not alter the lasting friendship between the two teachers.¹⁵

To assist her with the operation of the school, Christine chose some of her former pupils, whom she trained, instructed and encouraged. She extended the interests of the school to make it a most attractive and successful centre of education. Under her capable direction, Blondin Academy became one of the most progressive schools in the district.¹⁶

In addition the devoting herself whole-heartedly to her duties of teaching, Christine became actively involved in the parish sodality. In 1843 she was chosen president of the "Daughters of Mary Immaculate." While in this office, Christine consecrated her person and life to the Mother of God.

During the school year 1847 - 1848, failing health curtailed the activities of the zealous teacher. Despite her physical trials, however, Christine Blondin seriously concerned herself with the sorry plight of the children, both boys and girls, in the country districts of Quebec, who were growing up without the opportunity to attend school. She felt impelled to do something about the situation.¹⁷

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

In writing of the excessive mortifications, Father Brien states that the young novice sincerely believed that this aspect of her religious life did not fall under the jurisdiction of her spiritual directors.

¹⁴ Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 33.

In 1835, at his own expense, Father Archambeault built a more spacious and suitable school near the church to replace the original building near the village wharf.

¹⁵ _____, *Mother Mary Ann* (Montreal, 1930), p. 10.

Nine years after her resignation from the Vaudreuil Academy, Miss Suzanne Pineault returned to join her former assistant, as a sister-companion in the religious community.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Miss Blondin engaged a teacher for English and one for music. Such a move was considered very "advanced" for a village boarding school.

¹⁷ Sister Mary Ann Eva, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Regulations had imposed upon the directress of an academy the obligation of training teachers for the primary schools. Christine Blondin could not foresee how such a summary preparation could have satisfactory results. She felt called upon to undertake the apostolate of preparing teachers who would impart to children a well-organized and integrated primary education.

After prolonged and fervent prayer, Christine clearly perceived the course of action she should follow. She sought advice from her spiritual director, Father Archambeault, and presented to him her project of establishing a religious community. While forming young women to the religious life, she would give them sufficient instruction to enable them to direct the “mixed schools” of the rural districts. Almost prophetically, the good Father warned her: “You wish to found a community? Very well! Expect the suffer what the Mother of Sorrows suffered at the foot of the Cross.”¹⁸

Father Archambeault directed Christine to present her plan to Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montreal for his judgment and approval. In early June, she set out for the episcopal city bringing a letter of recommendation from her pastor. The letter explained briefly the project.

This young lady wishes to gather around her a certain number of girls to teach now at Vaudreuil and, later, in the neighbouring parishes. They would undertake schools not only for girls, but also for mixed classes, as demanded by the law which it is impossible to annul.

Any other explanation required will be given by Miss Blondin herself. She is a woman of solid piety.¹⁹

The zealous prelate, renowned for his keen judgment and practical genius, had a background of extensive experience with religious communities.²⁰ He questioned his visitor about her plans and pointed out the difficulties involved. Manifesting a strong faith and confidence in God, Christine Blondin won from the bishop permission to try her project. He authorized her to seek out quietly suitable companions for the enterprise and to pray for God’s blessing on her work.

Before school reopened in September, Christine and six companions began a retreat under Father Archambeault’s direction to initiate their new life under a common rule. At the close of their retreat, the aspirants petitioned the pastor to outline for them a rule of life, to appoint officers and to select a name for their congregation. The pastor-founder acceded to their requests. Miss Blondin was named directress of the group to be known as the Daughters of Our Lady of Good Help and of St. Ann.

Father Archambeault kept Bishop Bourget informed on the progress of the new institute. A letter dated November 1848 expressed his hope for the success of the new undertaking.

Your Lordship will be astonished to learn that thirty-eight have presented themselves – fifteen have already arrived – some are excellent subjects, both in talent and virtue.

I do not know the designs of Divine Providence, but if I judge *ab initio*,

¹⁸ Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁹ Reverend P. L. Archambeault, Letter to Bishop Bourget, June 11, 1848, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²⁰ Bishop Bourget had already founded three diocesan congregations: the Sisters of Providence in 1843, the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary in 1844 and the Sisters of Misericorde in 1848.

Providence is favourable to the project.²¹

The blessing of Providence was manifested in the poverty of the little establishment. The liberality of Lady Harwood of the seigneurial mansion in Vaudreuil did much to alleviate the needs of the Sisters. Despite hard work, discomfort and lack of convenience, there was a cheerful dedication to duty in the Vaudreuil convent.

Caught up as he was in parish activities, Father Archambeault could give but limited attention to his “Daughters.” It was Sister Blondin who personally formed, directed and inspired the first members of her religious family.

The results of the first school year, enriched with an intensive religious life, were very gratifying. Even during their novitiate, Sister Blondin and her companions followed a schedule of teaching and studying in addition to their religious exercises and household duties.

In August 1849, Coadjutor Bishop Prince came from Montreal to preach the investiture retreat for the postulants. He had been commissioned by his Ordinary “to examine whether the prospective institute was the work of God or of man, and whether it could withstand the vicissitudes and obstacles which were bound to assail it.”²² To this end, he tested rigorously the humility and spirit of renunciation of the aspirants.²³ That he was satisfied with what he found is evidenced by his report to Father Archambeault. “I believe that these Sisters are doing the work of God. They are saints.”²⁴ On August 15, 1849, nine postulants were admitted to investiture. By the choice of the bishop, Marie Esther (Christine) Blondin received the name Sister Mary Ann. Continuing the precedent established three months earlier during Bishop Bourget’s first visit to the Vaudreuil convent, Bishop Prince appointed the youngest professed Sister, Sister Mary Elizabeth, as directress of the community. Sister Mary Ann retained the positions of bursar and mistress of novices assigned to her in May by Bishop Bourget. As mistress of novices, the foundress had to send her superior back to the world three months later! Though others were assigned to the position of authority during the first two years of the community’s existence, Sister Mary Ann had the more important task of forming to religious life the first professed Sisters of her institute.²⁵

When the canonical year came to an end, five Sisters were admitted to religious profession. Bishop Bourget himself came to conduct the preparatory

²¹ Reverend P. L. Archambeault, Letter to Bishop Bourget, November 1848, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 52.

²² Sister Mary Ann Eva, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 45.

²³ Sister Mary Michel, one of the first postulants, has left a very candid and charming account of the investiture retreat in her “Memoirs,” reserved in the community archives in Lachine. Among others, it records the following incidents:

Bishop Prince interrupted one instruction to reprimand a Sister who was brushing away an annoying fly: “Let that little creature of the good God alone!”

Remonstrating on the manner in which the Sisters made the Sign of the Cross, the Bishop announced, “You wish to be Religious and you are not even good Christians!”

²⁴ _____, Mother Mary Ann (Montreal, 1930), p. 15.

²⁵ From May 1849 to January 1850 four directresses had succeeded Marie Esther Blondin. Of these, three afterwards left the community.

retreat. He preached, gave spiritual direction, presided over all the retreat exercises and privately interviewed each future professed. Such personal attention indicated his estimate of the importance of the coming event. It was to mark the definitive foundation of a religious institution and the integration of a new teaching order into the Church of Canada.

On September 8, 1850, the ceremony of the profession of first vows was held in the parish church at Vaudreuil with all possible Solemnity.²⁶ The Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Ann was founded. Bishop Bourget conferred canonical existence on the new institute by reading the Charter of Erection. This document, addressed to the five professed Sisters by name, decreed that the Sisters would devote their lives to “the instruction of children of both sexes.” The official mandate had modified the name of the new religious congregation, “Daughters of Saint Ann.”

“In giving you place in the Church of God, among the communities destined to be its most beautiful ornament, we are happy to be able to consecrate you to Saint Ann as a family especially devoted to her honour. Public gratitude, it would seem, demanded the foundation of just such a community. Nothing less than a religious monumen of this type could best pay our country’s tribute of gratitude, for the glorious Saint Ann has been truly good towards all the people of Canada!”²⁷

At the close of the retreat, Bishop Bourget appointed an administrative council for the new community. He constituted superior and mistress of novices of the Daughters of Saint Ann, their foundress, to be known now as Mother Mary Ann.

Six months later, in February 1851, the bishop returned to Vaudreuil for a three day canonical visit to initiate a period of special prayer in preparation for the writing of the rules. The following month he returned again to continue the work of drawing up the code of rules. Before leaving, he had settled the essential points of the constitution of the Daughters of Saint Ann.²⁸

During its first five years of existence, the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Ann suffered keenly from not having a chaplain. Because of his numerous duties, Father Archambeault did not have sufficient time for the spiritual care of his “Daughters.” In September 1850, Father Chevigny from a nearby parish had been appointed the first official chaplain, but because of parish duties, he too, was forced to resign after three weeks. Distressed by the situation, Mother Mary Ann wrote to Bishop Bourget. Since the bishop had no one to send, he requested the prayers of the Sisters that he would “find the man destined by God to minister to the

²⁶ Though September 8 was just the fifth day of the retreat, Bishop Bourget selected it for the date of the inauguration of the institute.

“Without doubt, it is in accordance with God’s views that your community came into existence on the anniversary of the birth of Mary, daughter of Blessed Ann.” (Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 64).

²⁷ Mandate of Erection, cited in Sister Mary Ann Eva, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 361.

²⁸ These first constitutions of 1851 would be revised in 1857, but the essential points were fixed in February 1851; namely, “a clear and precise view of the end to be attained, personal sanctification; and this is oriented towards a secondary end, the instruction and education of the poor children of the countryside.” (Sister Mary Ann Eva, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, page 61.)

community.”²⁹

One year later there was still no chaplain. However, at the recommendation of Bishop Bourget, Mother Mary Ann wrote often for advice and direction.³⁰ During the years 1851 to 1853, the foundress and the bishop exchanged about thirty letters.³¹ These documents clearly reveal two souls cooperating closely in God’s work.

His letters reveal the bishop as a master of the spiritual life. They depict him as a zealous shepherd concerned about his pastoral duties and the interests of the universal Church. In addition, they manifest his complete confidence in Mother Mary Ann. He supported her, encouraged her and showed a respect for her mission as foundress. One exchange of letters indicates that the bishop had asked Mother Mary Ann to complete the writing of the rules of the institute that he had left unfinished in March 1851.

Your humble and obedient daughter works as much as her strength allows to fulfill the task imposed on her by your Lordship; she has made great efforts to accomplish this duty; for three weeks she could not write a single word.³²

Mother Mary Ann’s letters reveal that the foundress was deserving of the bishop’s confidence. Her good judgment, her sense of responsibility and her religious spirit are manifested in her correspondence.³³

A year after the first profession, the new institute was ready to accept a foundation outside Vaudreuil. With thirteen professed Sisters and fifteen novices and postulants, the congregation was in a position to expand. At the request of Father Lefebvre and by the authorization of Bishop Bourget, three Sisters undertook to direct the village school in the parish of Saint Genevieve, ten miles distant from Vaudreuil to the north-east. In accepting this poor mission, the institute had the assurance of Bishop Bourget: “Remember that the poorest children are those that pay the best, because God undertakes to pay for them. They are also a source of blessings for the community.”³⁴

At Vaudreuil, conditions were becoming seriously overcrowded because of the ever-increasing number of novices and pupils. The near-destitute financial state of

²⁹ Bishop I. Bourget, Letter to Mother Mary Ann, November 16, 1851, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 89.

³⁰ “Write to me often, for I am intensely interested in your community. Perhaps I can do as much, or more, by letter as by words.” (Bishop I. Bourget, Letter to Mother Mary Ann, December 9, 1852 – Motherhouse Archives.)

³¹ The fifteen letters written by Bishop Bourget from December 20, 1850 to July 8, 1853 are preserved in the Motherhouse Archives at Lachine.

³² Mother Mary Ann, Letter to Bishop Bourget, July 15, 1851, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 92.

³³ “I noticed a great spirit of faith in God, of submission and trust in his Divine Will, of obedience to ecclesiastical authorities, of humility and of fortitude amidst the difficulties met with in life.” (Judgment passed by Theologians on the Writings of the Servant of God Mary Ann – December 16, 1960.)

³⁴ Bishop I. Bourget, Letter to Mother Mary Ann, November 4, 1851, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 96. Tuition charged at St. Genevieve was five francs a month and a cord of wood for the winter.

the young community, however, made impossible any ideas of expansion at its own expense.³⁵ Though the people of Vaudreuil appreciated the work of the Sisters among them, they did not want to sacrifice much for the organization or development of the institute.³⁶ In opposition to the pastor's suggestion, they refused to donate parish land for a new convent. The impasse was settled by Bishop Bourget who decided that the community would be transferred to St. Jacques, a Laurentian village seventy-two miles north-east of Vaudreuil.

Father Archambeault, who had played a role of prime importance in the foundation of the institute, was deeply affected by the news of the transfer of the Sisters. He received the official notice of withdrawal in a letter from the bishop.

Before arriving at Vaudreuil, I deem it a duty to inform you that I shall definitely withdraw the Community of Saint Ann from the parish and establish it at St. Jacques de l'Achigan. A spacious house, a beautiful chapel, one or two sections of farm land and a large estate await them there, and they will not have to contract a cent of indebtedness.³⁷

The Religious of the Sacred Heart had recently moved from their St. Jacques convent to establish a boarding school in Montreal. The bishop saw the vacated building as a providential refuge for the Daughters of Saint Ann.

In a letter dated July 8, 1853, the bishop officially communicated to Mother Mary Ann the news of the change in residence.³⁸ Though it was understood that some Sisters would be left at Vaudreuil to conduct the village school, the removal of the motherhouse to another centre was not without heartbreak. For Mother Mary Ann, it meant leaving the scene of twenty years of her life's work; for all the Sisters, it involved a separation from the place of their religious consecration and from the cradle of their congregation. The sympathetic bishop understood the sacrifices that the move entailed, but he had confidence in the generosity of the Sisters.³⁹

Reverend Louis Barrette, curate of the parish of Saint Jacques, who had already been designated as their chaplain by Bishop Bourget, assisted the Sisters in their transfer. The bishop himself arranged the details of the itinerary. Thus on August 23, 1853, twenty-eight Sisters of Saint Ann – sixteen professed sisters, six novices and six postulants – set out on their journey to St. Jacques.

³⁵ Mother Mary Ann's financial report of April 7, 1853, reserved in the community archives, contains the following information:

Value of landed property	nil
Active debts	\$54.50
Passive debts	\$25.40

³⁶ Sister Mary Dorothea, S.S.A., "Marie Esther Blondin," *Saint Ann's Journal*, April, 1950, p. 3.

³⁷ Bishop I. Bourget, Letter to Reverend P. L. Archambeault, June 23, 1853, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 102.

³⁸ By coincidence, this letter was written from Terrebonne, native town of Mother Mary Ann.

³⁹ "All this will necessarily cause you new trials, but, as usual, you will strive to draw profit from them." (Bishop I. Bourget, Letter to Mother Mary Ann, July 8, 1853 – Motherhouse Archives.)

The pastor, Reverend Romuald Paré, received the Sisters with joy and installed them in the large convent building. Within a short period of their arrival, the Sisters by their warm sympathy for the sick and the poor won the affection of the people.⁴⁰ Having been without a chaplain for so long, the Sisters valued the spiritual guidance of the experienced director, Father Barrette. Prospects augured well for the transplanted community.

On September 4, 1853, twelve days after the Sisters' arrival in St. Jacques, Reverend Louis Adolph Marechal came to the convent to introduce himself as the new chaplain. Since Mother Mary Ann had received no official statement from Bishop Bourget notifying her of the appointment, she was hesitant to accept the young priest in that capacity.

The chaplaincy of the convent at St. Jacques was the seventh assignment for the twenty-nine year old priest in his five years of ordination.⁴¹ Four years before the arrival of the Sisters of Saint Ann, Father Marechal had worked as a curate with Father Paré in the St. Jacques parish. In view of his previous experience, the aging pastor was less than enthusiastic about the return of his former curate.⁴²

Bishop Bourget, however, had discerned in Father Marechal a clear-sighted and zealous priest. As early as November 1850, he had intrusted to him the administration of the parish of St. Alphonse Rodriguez.

Mother Mary Ann, aware of the foreboding with which the pastor viewed Father Marechal's return, could have been on the defensive when she first met the new chaplain. She was apprehensive of the appointment, since she believed that it was detrimental to the spiritual interests of her daughters.

In a letter, written the day of Father Marechal's visit, Mother Mary Ann represented to Bishop Bourget the community's esteem for Father Barrette and of their confidence in his direction. She mentioned the estrangement from Father Marechal and the "ungracious reception" she had extended to the young priest.

In his reply Bishop Bourget severely reprimanded the foundress for her lack of confidence in the Providence of God.

You should have told Father Marechal that you received him with respect and gratitude since he came in the name of God, whose will was made known by that of the bishop. This is a bad beginning for you; if you do not hasten to repair it by all kinds of humiliations, you may be assured that a bad spirit will penetrate into your community.⁴³

⁴⁰ Mother Mary Ann provided a home in the St. Jacques convent for a badly-deformed, cancer-stricken girl who died a few months afterwards.

⁴¹ It is difficult to determine the reason for Father Marechal's frequent changes. They could be the result of lack of adjustment, on the one hand, or the sign of ready adaptability, on the other. Father Marechal served as chaplain at St. Jacques for five years before becoming pastor of the parish. From 1858 until 1867, he was the ecclesiastical superior of the community.

⁴² "He has caused me much suffering, the dear child. He sowed discord all along my path... If he complains of his assignments, please name him curate with a strong-armed pastor. . . ." (Reverend R. Paré, Letter to Bishop I. Bourget, November 10, 1850.)

⁴³ Bishop I. Bourget, Letter to Mother Mary Ann, September 5, 1853, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 135.

The initial misunderstanding between the young chaplain and the forty-four year old foundress was but a prelude to a year of lack of harmony. The conflict of personalities with its resultant differences of opinion between these two energetic souls who so ardently desired the good of the community gave rise to discord and disunity.⁴⁴ In his ardent zeal, the chaplain was inclined to forget that the congregation had its customs, its rule, its canonical legislation and its administrative autonomy.⁴⁵ Conscious of her mission and duties as foundress, Mother Mary Ann showed determination in resisting whatever she considered a threat to her community.⁴⁶

In many ways, the appointment of Father Marechal was timely at this critical stage in the development of the new community. As chaplain, he employed initiative, strength, time and vigour to promote the intellectual advancement of the Sisters of Saint Ann.⁴⁷ In contrast to the competency of the Religious of the Sacred Heart whom they were replacing at St. Jacques, the majority of the newcomers had but limited knowledge and experience. Financially, too, Father Marechal assisted the young community. Besides devising means for raising funds, he used his influence to win the support of benefactors for the convent.

Because of the lack of agreement between the superior and the chaplain, the first year at St. Jacques was a period of unrest and tension. In the conflict of rights and responsibilities, there developed a partisan spirit among the Sisters. There were some, particularly among the younger members, who were quite willing to concede to the chaplain unlimited freedom of action in the internal concerns of the institute. The lack of unity became seriously detrimental to community spirit.⁴⁸

Despite the internal struggles, outsiders were unaware of the conflict. The joys of the apostolate were a consolation to the Sisters in the midst of their trials. The results of the first year were gratifying to the pastor, parents and pupils. As a result

⁴⁴ Frederic Langevin, S.J., in his *Mère Marie Anne, Fondatrice de L'Institut des Soeurs de Sainte-Anne* (Montreal, 1935), has perhaps expressed the situation with more restraint and more clarity than any other author. "Deux amis de Dieu s'étaient mal compris : Monsieur Marechal arrivait à Saint-Jacques sans être attendu; il n'avait pas trente ans; la Supérieure en avait quarante-quatre."

⁴⁵ In the absence of Mother Mary Ann in September 1853 (the foundress had returned to Vaudreuil to settle unfinished business), Father Marechal raised the tuition of the students on his own initiative, and rented in the community's name a house in town for the day pupils.

⁴⁶ At the direction of Father Paré, the pastor, Mother Mary Ann refused to pay the rent or heat the building rented by the chaplain.

⁴⁷ Father Marechal himself taught the Sisters – French, history and arithmetic. He visited the classes and taught in the presence of the teachers.

⁴⁸ That Mother Mary Ann made conscientious efforts to reconcile her differences with the chaplain is obvious from Bishop Bourget's letters. a) "I had already learned from Father Honorat (retreat master) that you had done all I asked concerning your chaplain. Moreover, I knew you would do so... I am very pleased, nevertheless, that you explained to me your thoughts and feelings."

b) "The change of boarding school fees without consulting you is an irregularity, but I advise you to overlook the matter while awaiting more information. Say nothing on the subject. Ignore it altogether."

of earnest effort, the Sisters met success in their new educational endeavours.⁴⁹

By directives and by personal interviews, the bishop had hoped to reconcile the differences troubling the community at St. Jacques. Grieved by the continued discord, the over-taxed bishop determined to put an end to the division.⁵⁰ On August 18, 1854, he ordered Mother Mary Ann to relinquish her duties as superior.

As for you, my good Mother, you will resign willingly and you will tell your Sisters that you are authorized never again to accept the superiorship even if they wish you to assume it.

I will pray and have others pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you in perhaps the most important act that you have ever had to perform.⁵¹

Mother Mary Ann accepted the mandate with heroic submission. After enjoying for five years the confidence and support of Bishop Bourget, the foundress experienced a severe trial in his change of attitude. Circumstances, events and persons had succeeded in lowering her in his esteem.⁵²

On August 20, 1854 she dictated her reply to the bishop.

Most Reverend Father in Jesus Christ:

Behold I am at last relieved of the heavy burden of superiorship. I pity in advance her on whose shoulders it will fall. After having borne it for four years amidst continual contradictions, I am able to judge the weight of this charge. I praise God and thank you very respectfully for the mandate in which Your Lordship bids me not to accept this office in the future.

What hurts me particularly at this moment is that I did not do all the good that I would have liked to accomplish for the glory of God and the good of the community, and that I have done the wrong that I certainly did not wish to do.⁵³

Six years after she had founded her institute, Mother Mary Ann was relegated to its lowest rank. For a time even, she was excluded from active duty. To a young novice who expressed shock at such humiliation, the foundress made a profound observation: "The deeper a tree sinks its roots into the soil, the stronger it

⁴⁹ As the reputation of the Sisters grew, the number of pupils increased. Within the first year, the enrolment increased from 22 to 208. Religious vocations flourished in the boarding school. The official statistics of St. Jacques parish compiled in 1947 by Courteau and Lanoue show that there have been 204 vocations to the Sisters of Saint Ann.

⁵⁰ Over and above the regular administration of Montreal, the most populous diocese in Canada, Bishop Bourget had additional burdens to face at this time: the reconstruction of his cathedral destroyed by fire, the division into parishes of his episcopal city of 65,000 souls and the introduction of what was considered a daring liturgical reform, the Roman Ceremonial.

⁵¹ Bishop I. Bourget, Letter to Mother Mary Ann, August 18, 1854, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁵² Bishop Bourget sincerely believed in August 1854 that the good of the institute required the removal from office of its foundress. (Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 159.)

⁵³ Mother Mary Ann, Letter to Bishop I. Bourget, August 20, 1854, cited in Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 162.

becomes.”⁵⁴

For thirty-six years she saw her congregation grow and spread while other hands were directing its progress. She lived out her life in her community in the shadow of retreat. Until her death on January 2, 1890, Mother Mary Ann performed her round of humble tasks in the infirmary, the sacristy, the sewing-room, the laundry and the ironing-room.

In the preface of the “History of the Sisters of Saint Ann,” Father Lionel Groulx has written:

The debasement of the foundress, which could have occasioned a fatal crisis in the newly-founded community, served, on the contrary, to give extraordinary impetus to its growth. There exists more than a simple parallelism between her life of annihilation and sacrifice and the development of her work.⁵⁵

Since September 8, 1850, when Mother Mary Ann and her first four companions pronounced their vows of religion, more than 3,700 Sisters have signed their contract as members of the Sisters of Saint Ann. After one hundred fifteen years of existence, the community now numbers one hundred sixty-five establishments, dispersed over twenty-five dioceses and two apostolic vicariates in Quebec, British Columbia, Yukon Territory, Alaska, United States, Haiti and Chile.

Viewing the congregation’s growth at the time of its fiftieth anniversary, historian Abbé Elie Auclair expressed the conviction that “the institute grew without Mother Mary Ann, it is true, but it is Mother Mary Ann who merited its growth.”⁵⁶

Among the seven religious provinces and one pro-province that now constitute the administrative organization of the Sisters of Saint Ann, St. Joseph’s Province is the final concern of the present paper. Its history records the growth of the congregation in British Columbia, Alaska and the Yukon. Its development is a tribute “to the valiant woman upon whose faith and courageous determination the community was founded.”⁵⁷

In 1857 Bishop Modeste Demers, the first Bishop of Vancouver Island, approached the young community at St. Jacques for Sisters to assist him in his frontier diocese which included the present province of British Columbia and the

⁵⁴ In 1854, it was planned to expel Mother Mary Ann from the community under the pretext that the good of her soul and that of the institute required her dismissal.

In 1854, “an episcopal injunction was extorted: ‘... it will be necessary to give her all possible rest, in such a way, however, that she will exert no influence over anyone.’” Mother Mary Ann was sent to Saint Ambroise without any assignment whatever.

After the motherhouse had been moved to Lachine, Mother Mary Ann was received there in 1864 “through charity” to see to the menial tasks of the ironing department. (Mother Mary Leopoldine, S.S.A., Circular Letter, No. 30, pp. 6-7, April 18, 1949.)

⁵⁵ Father Lionel Groulx, cited in Sister Mary Ann Eva, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, Introduction.

⁵⁶ Rev. Elie Auclair, *History of the Sisters of Saint Ann*, trans. Mother Mary Mildred, S.S.A. (Montreal, 1939), Preface.

⁵⁷ Sister Mary Dorothea, S.S.A., *St. Ann’s Journal*, April, 1950, p. 8.

territory of Alaska. Although the congregation was not yet eight years old, the entire community of thirty-eight professed Sisters were ready to volunteer for the far-away mission.⁵⁸ In a letter to Mother Mary Jeanne de Chantal, Superior General, Bishop Demers spoke of the missionary endeavours of the Sisters in his diocese.

The young Community of Saint Ann should be praised; rather it should glorify God for having been able to send some of its members to the distant shores of the Pacific. I believe that the story of this foundation will be one of the most beautiful pages of its history.⁵⁹

Four Sisters – Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart, Sister Mary Angele, Sister Mary of the Conception and Sister Mary Lumena – were chosen for the western mission. Travelling in a group headed by Bishop Demers, the Sisters set out on their eventful two months' journey for Vancouver Island. Sister Mary Angele's diary has left a classic account of the hardships of pioneer travel.⁶⁰ Eventually, at San Francisco, the missionaries boarded the "Seabird" which brought them to Victoria on Saturday, June 5, 1858. The date marks the foundation of the first convent institution west of Saint Boniface and north of Oregon.⁶¹ At that time, Victoria was little more than a stockaded fort. British Columbia had not yet been established as a separate colony.⁶²

In a humble log cabin at the edge of Beacon Hill Park, the four pioneer Sisters began their work of teaching, nursing and social service. In 1859, twenty-two year old Mother Mary Providence, an able and gifted administrator, was appointed

⁵⁸ Since the visit of Archbishop Norbert Blanchet of Oregon to Vaudreuil in 1851, Mother Mary Ann had cherished dreams of a missionary apostolate in the west. (Sister Mary Camilla, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 231.)

"History records that Mother Mary Ann was among those who offered themselves for the west, but she was not chosen. Intensely interested, she asked the privilege of bidding farewell to the favoured four. This she was refused. With humble submission, she then wrote that she would be content to visit her dear missionaries in the west after her death. Although her superiors could not deny her this hope, through Father Marechal they did reproach her for expressing such pride and curiosity." (Mother Mary Liliane, S.S.A., Superior General, Centenary Address, Victoria, B.C., June 8, 1958.)

⁵⁹ Bishop M. Demers, Letter to Mother M. Jeanne de Chantal, March 20, 1861, cited in Sister Mary Ann Eva, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 156.

⁶⁰ Twenty-eight years before the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed, the Sisters travelled to their western destination by steamship, by train and by rowboat around the Isthmus of Panama. Because of the low tide at the Isthmus, the travellers had to be carried on the back of negroes to the rowboats waiting offshore. Sister Mary Angele relates the event with candour. "The bare back trip of some ninety feet cost a dollar apiece, but my carrier clamoured for more pay, since, said he, I weighed more than the others. I tipped the scales at 172." (Diary of Sister Mary Angele, 1858.)

⁶¹ Sister Mary Dorothea, S.S.A., "The Century We Celebrate," *The Canadian League*, March, 1958, p. 36.

⁶² August 2, 1858 is the date of the act which established British Columbia as a separate colony.

superior of the western mission. With Mother Mary Anne of Jesus, who joined her in Victoria in 1866, she laid the foundations for schools, hospitals and missions throughout British Columbia, Alaska and the Yukon.

Four years after the arrival of the first Sisters, the missionaries, overwhelmed by the demands of the apostolate and hampered by a shortage of personnel, voted to return to Quebec. The minutes of the council meeting held on July 22, 1862, state:

In a regular meeting of the House Council of the Daughters of Saint Ann in Victoria, it has been officially and unanimously decided by vote to request the community for the recall of the Sisters of this mission.⁶³

A year later, however, eight Sisters arrived from the motherhouse to reinforce the mission band and to make possible the expansion of apostolic works in the province.

The first foundation outside the city of Victoria, a mission school for Indian girls, was established at Cowichan in 1864. In the fall of 1868, a similar school was opened at St. Mary's, Matsqui, at the request of Bishop d'Herbomez, O.M.I. This location was the centre of Oblate missionary activity for the lower Fraser valley. In 1890 and 1891, the Sisters undertook the charge of teaching in the Indian residential schools of Kamloops and Kuper Island.

In 1865, the Sisters had first extended their work to the mainland of British Columbia. At New Westminster, they had established a boarding and day school. In 1877, a similar foundation was made at Nanaimo. Three years later, the Kamloops boarding school came into existence.

In 1875, Bishop Charles Seghers blessed the cornerstone of the future St. Joseph's Hospital in Victoria. Twenty-five years later, the school of nursing was opened. In 1886, the Sisters made a hazardous journey to Juneau, Alaska to open a hospital and school there. The Klondike gold rush of 1898 was the occasion of the opening of St. Mary's Hospital, Dawson, Yukon Territory.

In 1888, three Sisters braved the hardships of Alaska to open a native school at Holy Cross within the Arctic circle. In 1899, at the request of the Jesuit Fathers, the Sisters opened a school for Indian children at Nulato, an Alaskan village hallowed by the martyrdom of Bishop Seghers.⁶⁴

During the early years of expansion, recruits from the motherhouse in Lachine carried on the work. In 1889, however, Rome granted a decree for the opening of a branch novitiate of the Sisters of Saint Ann in the west. Since its opening, two hundred ninety-eight Sisters have completed their novitiate in Victoria. Most of these candidates have been students in the community's schools and hospitals of British Columbia.

From Lachine, Mother Mary Ann followed with affection and pride the activities of her daughters in the west. In a letter to the missionary Sisters, she wrote:

⁶³ Council Book, Archives of St. Ann's Academy, Victoria, B.C.

⁶⁴ Bishop Charles Seghers, who replaced Bishop Modeste Demers in Victoria, merited the title of "Apostle of Alaska" because of his interest in and concern for the northern outposts of his diocese. On his way to Nulato in 1886, Bishop Seghers was murdered by a mentally deranged guide on November 27, when he was just forty miles from his destination.

You understand how interested I am in the Victoria foundation. With my own eyes, I saw the birth of the little Community of the Daughters of Saint Ann. I was a witness of its first years, and even in the midst of the great happiness which then flooded my soul, little did I foresee that, one day, its happy members would accomplish such great things in distant lands.⁶⁵

Mother Mary Ann's contribution to the Church in British Columbia, Alaska and the Yukon is the work of the Sisters of Saint Ann, for, in reality, the community is an extension of its foundress. For a period of thirty-two years between 1858 and 1890, the Sisters of Saint Ann were the only community of women Religious engaged in apostolic work in British Columbia. During that time, they laid the groundwork of education and nursing service in our province.

Today there are two hundred ninety Sisters in St. Joseph's Province. They staff twenty-eight separate institutions in six dioceses and two vicariates. Numbered among the foundations are four private academies and boarding schools, five Indian residential and day schools, eleven parish schools, four hospitals, two infirmaries and homes for the aged, and two Alaskan missions.

From the beginning of its history, St. Joseph's Province has manifested a strong attachment to the motherhouse and a filial devotion to Mother Mary Ann. In commenting on this fact at the time of the centenary celebrations in 1958, Mother Mary Liliane, Superior General, addressed the following words to the Sisters gathered in Victoria:

Though many of you, born and nurtured in western Canada, scarcely know the motherhouse, you are loyally attached to its ideals and eagerly await the fulfilment of your desire to see the heart of the institute, meanwhile remaining true daughters of Mother Mary Ann.

I was deeply impressed during my first visit in 1945 to find among you a very evident esteem and love for Mother Mary Ann. From its birth in 1858, our foundress had a special predilection for this western province.⁶⁶

It is with reason, therefore, that the Sisters of the West, with their companions in the north, south and east welcomed the news of Mother Mary Ann's step to beatification. They look forward to the day when the virtues of their foundress will be officially recognized by the Church.

⁶⁵ Mother Mary Ann, Letter to Sister Mary Providence, July 16, 1876, cited in Sister Mary Ann Eva, S.S.A., *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁶⁶ Mother Mary Liliane, S.S.A., Centenary Address, June 8, 1958, cited in the *Centennial Anniversary booklet*, pp. 34-36.