

Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame Nineteenth Century Kingston

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In this tercentenary year of the foundation of Kingston and in the context of today's concern for the role of women in the Church's mission, this topic is pertinent. To talk about the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame in nineteenth century Kingston is to recognize the part played by religious women in the early development of this city and this diocese.

It was in 1841 that the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame¹ opened a school for girls in Kingston. Bishop Remi Gaulin with the help of the new Bishop of Montreal, Monseigneur Ignace Bourget, brought the Sisters to Kingston. In October of 1841 Bishop Bourget visited the Mother house in Montreal and asked the Sisters to pray especially for God's guidance in "a matter of importance for the glory of God and the good of Religion."² On November 2, he put before the assembled community the question of opening a mission in Kingston, the new seat of the country's government. He set before them the compelling reasons for such a foundation and the hardships it would entail and he outlined Bishop Gaulin's specific proposal for action. In this address Monseigneur Bourget told the Sisters of the plan of the Bishop of Kingston to build a cathedral without delay, in order to "cede to the Sisters for the purpose of education, the presbytery, quite a large house, with the Church ... and all the adjoining ground already placed in reserve for them."³ Bishop Gaulin's memory on this point was to prove short-lived.

The Community in its deliberations foresaw many difficulties, but finally agreed that the proposal of a mission at Kingston should be accepted. Of the number of Sisters who volunteered for the venture, three were chosen. Of these it was Sister St. Alexander⁴ and Sister St. Edward⁵ who actually set forth on

¹ For background material on the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, cf. Sister St. Ignatius DOYLE, C.N.D., *Marguerite Bourgeoys and Her Congregation*, Gardenvale, Quebec

² E. C. LEBEL, *Histoire de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Montréal*, Montréal, 1941. Vol. VIII, p. 147.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁴ *Archives of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame. Necrologies*, Vol. 1, p. 80. Hereinafter cited as *ACND*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

November 21, 1841, as pioneers in founding the first Congregation mission in Upper Canada and the first in an English-speaking milieu.⁶

For the next eleven years Sister St. Alexander would be the moving spirit, the guide and the support of the little community of Sisters that slowly increased to five. Time and again there would be need for more adequate physical accommodations and the worry of insufficient revenue due to small numbers of boarding students, increased numbers of nonpaying students, and the absence of government support for the education of the latter. There would be the never-ending struggle to obtain more Sisters for the mission, and in addition to the tension of everyday life there would be that created by the eccentricities of the ailing Bishop Gaulin.

Closely associated with the two Sisters as their Chaplain in the first year of the foundation was Father Charles Prince, a canon of the diocese of Montreal, and later Bishop of St. Hyacinthe, Quebec. He was a man with an historical sense, and in a letter to the Reverend Mother, he urged that accounts be kept of all that transpired during those pioneer days.⁷ Fire has since destroyed many records, but reports and letters from Father Prince and from the Sisters themselves give us a few details. One of the Sisters' first acts was to take into their home a seven-year-old child, Mary Ann Burns, whose mother, living in a stable, was dying of cancer. During the initial months the Sisters were befriended by a good neighbour, Mrs. Baker, who allowed them to use her pantries and cupboards for storing food-stuffs and her yard for drying clothes. The apartment rented for them, without attic or cellar or yard, was located on an upper floor of a large brick house in Market Square. Several families as well as the City Council had rooms in the building. The Sisters were disturbed particularly by the meetings of the Council which were noisy affairs with much pounding and banging on tables, often far into the night.

One very frightening experience occurred the week before Christmas when the capital city was celebrating the birth of the Prince of Wales with a public feast, free refreshments and fireworks. When the barbecued ox was not ready in time to satisfy the people's hunger, part of the crowd turned its anger against the Mayor. He took refuge in the Council Chambers across from the

⁶ For background material relating to previous missions in Canada of the Congregation of Notre Dame, cf. *Archives of the Archdiocese of Montreal*: 255.102/828-2, 8283, 828-5, 828-7, 829-6, 830-6, 830-24; 255.103/828-3; 525.101/829-1; *Archives of the Archdiocese of Kingston*: A11C24-1, A11C24-6, A14 D2-24; H. J. SOMERS, *The Life and Times of the Hon. and Rt. Rev. Alexander MacDonell, First Bishop of Upper Canada*, Washington, 1931; F. A. WALKER, *Catholic Education and Politics in Upper Canada*, Toronto, 1955; E. J. LAJEUNESSE, "The Coming of the First Nun to Upper Canada," *CCHA Report*, 1955.

⁷ LEBEL, *op. cit.*, Vol. VIII, pp. 157-158.

terrified Sisters. Only when threats of jail were made by the owner of the building was the riot quelled and the crowd dispersed. There still remained, however, for the Sisters the fear of being trapped by fire if the illumination of the Chambers was not carefully watched, but plans for the public illumination were abandoned before damage could be done. There were times during those weeks of anxiety, fatigue and loneliness when the two Sisters were tempted to give up and return to Montreal. But, says the annalist, “thinking about the immense good there was to be done in a city that had as yet no religious institutions, they revived their confidence and zeal and felt stronger than ever to continue the good work they had begun.”⁸

In the spring of 1842 better housing was found, and on June 16 the Sisters moved to a house on Earl Street which Bishop Gaulin rented from a Mrs. MacDonnell. This brought them nearer to the church and gave them quieter and roomier accommodations. It had the disadvantage, however, of being subject to flooding to a depth of three or four feet several times a year. No sooner had the Sisters moved to these larger quarters than Bishop Gaulin asked them to open another class, one for children whose parents could not afford tuition fees. The request embarrassed the Sisters since they had no extra room in their lodgings, but Father Prince came to their rescue and at his own expense prepared a classroom in the attic of the Earl Street house. In telling Bishop Bourget of the move, Father Prince pointed out that two new teachers were a necessity for the mission and urged the Bishop to press the issue with the Reverend Mother from whom Prince had evidently already received a refusal. This was only the first of many attempts over the years to get additional Sisters to serve the ever-growing-needs of the mission.⁹

When the end of August was near and no Sisters had yet arrived to help with the expanded enrollment, Sister St. Alexander set out for Montreal to present personally to Bishop Bourget and to the Congregation the needs of her little school. Her determination won the day for she returned for the opening of school with a newly-professed religious, Sister St. Agatha, and a lay assistant, a Miss Higgins.¹⁰ As the number of students increased, Bishop Gaulin had a two-storey wooden building erected for them on the grounds of the bishopric. This was ready in June 1843 and Sister St. Agatha and her assistant went twice daily to teach there.

At least as early as June 1842 Father Prince had indicated to Bishop Bourget that Bishop Gaulin was showing signs of a physical and mental breakdown. During the summer his condition deteriorated and in September Bishop Gaulin himself agreed to have a coadjutor appointed because of the

⁸ *Archives of the Archdiocese of Montreal*: 255. 102/842-8. Hereinafter cited as *AAM*.

⁹ *Loc. cit*

¹⁰ LEBEL, *op. cit.*, Vol. VIII, p. 172.

state of his health.¹¹ Patrick Phelan was chosen for this responsibility. With Bishop Gaulin's retirement from active work in the diocese, Bishop Phelan was named administrator and bore the heavy responsibilities of this office until his death in 1857.

Bishop Phelan like his predecessor, was vitally concerned with the education of the young people of his diocese as well as with Catholic education in general in Upper Canada. Housing for the Sisters and their pupils and staffing for the school were two of his great concerns. In April 1844 the Bishop reminded Reverend Mother St. Madeleine of her unfulfilled promise of the preceding August to send another Sister to Kingston.¹² In at least six letters between January 1845 and May 1846 he asked Bishop Bourget to help in the cause.¹³ In the fall of 1846 these persistent efforts were finally rewarded, for a fourth Sister was assigned to the mission in Kingston.

Bishop Phelan told Mother St. Madeleine that he hoped to place the Sisters in better circumstances soon. It is possible that the Sisters moved from the Earl Street house in the spring of 1844, because records show that for the next two years the Bishop was paying rent to a Mr. Allan McLean for a house on Arthur Street "actually in possession of the Congregation nunnery."¹⁴ In 1846 the Sisters moved their boarding school into the Bishop's house on Johnson and Bagot Streets. To make this possible Bishop Phelan had to take up temporary residence at Regiopolis because the new bishopric next to the cathedral was not yet ready for occupancy. The Sisters were grateful to move into these larger, more convenient quarters connected by a covered walk to the day school. They would now have a chapel with the Blessed Sacrament under their own roof. They were hopeful that this move would bring about a better feeling among the people of Kingston towards their school and an increase of boarders. On the basis of this hope, Bishop Phelan wrote to Mother St. Madeleine, "I intend to convert into a dormitory the upper floor of the free school, connect it with the existing dormitory in the new quarters and thus make room for twenty-five or thirty boarders." The Sisters could then use most of the large house for various classrooms and living rooms, and the bottom floor would be turned into two large classrooms for "the poor children."¹⁵ It was in this house that the Sisters would live and work from 1846 to 1969.

During these early years lack of funds was a very serious problem and in 1843 threatened the mission's very existence. Sister St. Alexander obtained

¹¹ *AAM*: 255.102/842-8,842-9,842-10.

¹² LEBEL, *op. cit.*, Vol. VIII, p. 338.

¹³ *AAM*: 255.102/845-1, 845-2,845-9, 846-2, 846-4, 846-5.

¹⁴ *Archives of the Archdiocese of Kingston*: C15BD4.

¹⁵ LEBEL, *op. cit.* Vol. VIII, p. 345. 16

permission from the Mother House to seek financial help from C.N.D. foundations in that area. Their support enabled her to continue the work that she and Sister St. Edward and Sister St. Agatha were then doing. The Bishop, too, was generous, but it is evident from his letters to the Bishop of Montreal that his own financial position was precarious. In one of these letters Bishop Phelan speaks of the expenses of the free school, five *piastres* a month for the lay teacher and a hundred *louis* and more for the upkeep of the building.¹⁶ In another letter he asks Bishop Bourget to put off for another while sending the Hotel Dieu Sisters to Kingston because “we must be sure they will have enough to sustain themselves for several years.” “I mention this,” he says, “because I am already overburdened and I fear being in debt. The people of Kingston do not show themselves zealous enough for the Sisters who are already here; they scarcely have the means to live without my help. Between ourselves, I tell you, although they have many pupils, these are from the poor.”¹⁷

Sister St. Alexander was transferred from Kingston in 1848. Sister St. Edward had two years before returned to the Mother House because of ill health. However, school opened in September 1848 for the first time with five Sisters on the staff Sister St. Columban (Comyns) who had replaced Sister St. Agatha four years earlier was now in charge. Assisting her were Sister St. Thecla (Phelan), Sister St. Stanislas (Plamondon), Sister St. Eulalia (Bélanger) and Sister St. Julie (Bouthillier).¹⁸

When Sister St. Alexander returned in 1849 the problem of overcrowding had once again been solved, but another situation had developed which was to plague the remainder of her years in Kingston. By this time Bishop Gaulin was physically well enough to return to Upper Canada and he attempted to take up once again the administration of his diocese. His first efforts were directed towards having Bishop Phelan and his pastoral staff move back into their former parochial residence which was now the Sisters’ boarding school, and thus free the new bishopric for himself. For at least four years both Bishop Phelan and the Sisters were harassed by the actions of the unfortunate prelate. In 1850 he tried to send the Congregation Sisters away and replace them with an order that he planned to found. His last efforts were directed towards getting the Sisters to move out so that he might have the convent for his own residence.¹⁹

At this period, although the number of boarders had increased, the

¹⁶ *AAM*: 255.102/845-1.

¹⁷ *AAM*: 255.102/845-2.

¹⁸ LEBEL, *op. cit.*, Vol. VIII, p. 337.

¹⁹ *AAM*: 255.102/849-5, 850-9, 850-10, 850-16, 850.17, 850.18, 851.2, 851-6, 851-15, 851.19.

situation in regard to the day school was a source of anxiety. Increasingly large numbers of children from other schools were asking for admission and more teachers were absolutely necessary.²⁰ In January 1852 Bishop Phelan begged the Reverend Mother for at least one other Sister. In April Sister St. Alexander took it upon herself to appeal to Bishop Bourget to intervene. The greatest need was for a Sister to teach the first class, then numbering sixty, which was subject to frequent visits from inspectors who were very rigorous in their demands. Moreover some of the older girls, of eighteen or so, had never been to confession and could not answer the simplest questions about religion. Ashamed of their ignorance, they would not accept any but a Sister as their teacher. It is impossible to say whether or not the fifth Sister came that year. The records show only that ten years later there were seven or eight on the staff and that in 1864 there were for the first time nine Sisters in the Kingston Mission.²¹

Additional anxiety must have been created at the time of the establishment of the first Separate Schools in the diocese. In accord with the Common School Act of 1847 the City Council of Kingston had appointed a Board of Trustees to supervise the financial affairs of the common schools. Among the thirteen schools listed in June 1852 as being under the Board was "The Nuns' School." The Board's report of August 1853 showed the total number of children in the fourteen schools under its supervision as 718, of whom 105 attended the Nuns' School. This same year the Christian Brothers' school, just opened, was added to the list. A feeling was apparent, however, among Protestant members of the community that the two Catholic schools could not be considered common schools in the true sense of the term. In October 1854 the Board removed the two schools from their list and stopped paying the teachers' salaries. A petition presented in November to the Trustees, however, resulted in the establishment the following year of the first two Separate Schools in Kingston.²² These were St. Mary's School for boys which would operate under the aegis of the Christian Brothers until the Sisters of Providence replaced them in 1893 and the Nuns' School which would be housed after 1859 in the former church and called St. Joseph's or, at times, the Bishop's School. When the old church was demolished in 1891 and a new building erected, the school-reopened as St. Vincent's Academy, the predecessor of today's Cathedral School.

These years, 1841-1868, are important ones both in the educational and religious history of Kingston and in the history of the Congregation. They form a period in which the Congregation began to grow and develop within

²⁰ *AAM: Congregation of Notre Dame File*, Vol. II, No. 15.

²¹ *Loc. cit.*

²² Sister St. Alfred of Rome BAESZLER, *The Congregation of Notre Dame in Ontario and the United States*, New York, 1944, pp. 61-78.

a growing and developing Canada. The foundation in Kingston was the forerunner of English-language houses in the Maritimes, in the United States, in Montreal, and elsewhere in Ontario.