

Catholic Post-secondary Education for Women in Quebec: Its Beginnings in 1908

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Historical Role of the Catholic Church in Education

During the years following the Quebec Act of 1774, the Roman Catholic Church emerged as a powerful, conservatively-oriented force, gradually gaining control of the education of both French-speaking and English-speaking Roman Catholics. This control was exercised at all education levels from primary through university, and was part of the Church's ascendancy in all aspects of Quebec society.

Legislative enactments beginning in the 1840s gradually shaped an education system characterized by its duality – a system divided along religious rather than linguistic lines – with Catholics and Protestants *de facto* operating separate, autonomous education systems. Antithetical to both the liberalism and anticlericalism that had arisen in France following the Revolution, the Church in Quebec had strengthened the conservative and ultramontane ideology established by Bishop Laval. Following the defeat of Papineau in the Rebellions of 1837-38, “the way was cleared for a clerical assault on the idea of lay education.”¹ With legislation in 1841, 1845, 1846 and 1856, the dominant characteristics of the dual system of Quebec education were established and the Church strengthened its hold over all aspects of Quebec life. In 1843, Bishop Jean-Jacques Lartigue stated: “It is correct to say that, if education has made some progress in the country, it is mainly due to the constant efforts and sacrifices of the clergy.”²

During the 1840s and 1850s, the Church forged a strong link with French Canadian nationalism as the voice of *la survivance* by convincing

¹ Magnuson, R. *A Brief History of Quebec Education: From New France to Parti Québécois*. Montreal: Harvest House, 1980, p.30.

² Falardeau, J.-C. “The Changing Social Structures of Contemporary French-Canadian Society,” in M. Rioux & Y. Martin (eds.), *French-Canadian Society* (Vol. 1). Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1953. p. 348.

Quebec society that the unity of religion, nation and family was the best means of ensuring the survival of language and culture. By influencing the press and politicians from the pulpit, the Church was in a position to control how its members voted, and what they read and believed. In 1869 the Church brought about the demise of the *Institut Canadien* because of its liberal and anticlerical stance, and exercised an ecclesiastical ban of a number of newspapers.³ Through its power to exclude its members from the sacraments and to pronounce excommunication, the Church wielded a power greater than that exercised by civil authority.

For different reasons, both Catholics and Protestants resisted attempts by the government to determine education policy, and ensured that the post of Minister of Public Instruction was abolished in 1875, just seven years after it had been established. *De facto* power over education was vested in the two Committees of the Council of Public Instruction which met separately and which were structured on religious lines. The 1875 Act by which this Council was set up was the legislation which established the structures in effect until the 1960s and put Catholic education firmly into the hands of the clergy. By an 1883 agreement between the Quebec government and the Council of Public Instruction, the former bound itself not to present before the legislature any bill regarding education without prior consultation with the Catholic and/or Protestant Committees.⁴ As Guindon observed, “Politics in Quebec structurally require a deal between clergy and politicians; this is the significant fact of democracy in Quebec.”⁵

After 1875, the Bishops sat as members of the Catholic Committee and thus were able to control all aspects of education policy. The victory of highly conservative ultramontane Catholicism was consolidated and Roman Catholic philosophy of education permeated the curriculum at all levels of Catholic schooling. Until 1929, when the *cours primaires supérieurs* was instituted,⁶ secondary education was the responsibility of the private, clergy-operated *collèges classiques* and was essentially elitist. It also

³ Magnuson, op. cit., pp. 29, 41.

⁴ Quebec. *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec*. Vol. 1. Quebec: Editeur officiel, 1963, p. 25. Cited as *Parent Report*.

⁵ Guindon, H. “The Social Evolution of Quebec Reconsidered.” In M. Rioux & Y. Martin (Eds.), *French-Canadian Society* (Vol. 1). Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1953, p. 159.

⁶ *Parent Report*, Vol. 1, p. 18.

effectively excluded females, since the classical colleges were for male students only.

This either-or duality of French and Catholic or Protestant and English did not accord with reality, because from the early days of New France there had been English-speaking Catholics in Quebec. By 1860, there were 50,192 Irish in Lower Canada, 14,179 of whom were in Montreal.⁷ Influxes of Catholic Scots, Germans and Eastern Europeans, mostly non-English in origin, had become part of the English-speaking population.⁸

Once confessional duality became entrenched in education legislation, the English-speaking Catholics found themselves in a confessional and linguistic no-man's-land. By law they were eligible to attend Protestant schools, but tradition and religious differences kept this group in the Catholic schools. To go to English schools meant a sacrifice of their Catholic faith, but to go to the almost totally French Catholic schools, meant a sacrifice of their language. Thus the English Catholics constituted a double minority, or as described by John Moir,⁹ a third solitude. English Catholics with means could send their sons to the English-speaking section of Collège Ste-Marie (which later became Loyola College) for a collegial education. Their daughters could go to the Villa Maria Convent (founded in 1856 and run by the Congregation of Notre Dame), or to other convent schools for primary and secondary education.

It was not until 1908 that Catholic girls, either French- or English-speaking, were able to continue their education at the post-secondary level. Prior to 1908, Catholic girls wishing a post-secondary education had two options: to attend McGill University (nonsectarian but viewed as Protestant), or to go to another province, the United States or France. Obviously these options were limited to girls from families with means and a progressive attitude towards university education for females. The Church approved of none of these options. In McGill or another university in Canada or the United States, the girls received an English education, and in France they received a secular education.

The second half of the nineteenth century was also a time of change within the Catholic Church itself as it grew dramatically in power in Quebec:

⁷ Keep, G.R.C., "The Irish Adjustment in Montreal," *Canadian Historical Review*, 31, 1950, p. 39.

⁸ Moir, J.S., "The Problem of a Double Minority," *Social History*, 7, April, 1971, p. 56.

⁹ Moir, *ibid.*, p. 57.

The conservative climate that permeated the Union period, the fear of assimilation, and the social problems brought about by the growth of cities all provided opportunities for the Church to expand its role.... By linking itself more closely to the Holy See, the Church was able to become the dominant social and cultural institution in French Canada.¹⁰

Strong and ambitious Church leaders like Bishop Ignace Bourget grasped every opportunity during the mid and later years of the nineteenth century to extend the power and authority of the Church, especially in the realm of education. The Church encouraged the growth of female religious orders, which until the 1840s had stagnated, their numbers never greater than 260 women in all orders in Quebec.¹¹ By 1871, the number was over 2000 and by 1900, over 6000.¹² Between 1840 and 1900, 24 female religious communities were founded or brought to Quebec.¹³ All of the uncloistered communities directed their efforts to providing education and social services, both of which areas were firmly under Church control.

The growing political power of the Church assured these orders of a leading role in education and protected them from outside competition by controlling teacher training and hiring, and by certification of teaching brothers and sisters.

The granting of virtual autonomy to teaching communities... gave religious men and women exactly the kind of independence from secular authorities that the Church argued was their due. In time, each order began to take for granted this favoured status and to use it to its own advantage.¹⁴

Sister Lucienne Plante observed in her doctoral study of classical education in Quebec that the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame argued that the novitiate provided suitable teacher-training for its members.

¹⁰ Danylewycz, M. *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987, pp.21-22.

¹¹ Danylewycz, op. cit., p. 17.

¹² *Census of Canada*, 1871, 1901.

¹³ Les Directrices des Quinze Collèges Classiques de Jeunes Filles de la Province de Québec, *Mémoire des collèges classiques de jeunes filles à la Commission Royale d'Enquête sur les Problèmes Constitutionnels*. Unpublished manuscript, 1954, p. 19.

¹⁴ Danylewycz, op. cit., p. 24.

From the mid-1800s, under Bishops Jean-Jacques Lartigue and Ignace Bourget, Catholicism in Quebec, especially in Montreal, was anti-liberal and ultramontane, a bastion protecting and advocating a traditional authority system. It had “established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority.”¹⁵ The Church also stood against any form of secularism or government control of Catholic education. As Louis-Philippe Audet noted: “L’oeuvre de l’éducation leur a semblé trop délicate pour rester à la portée des contrecoups politiques.”¹⁶ In promoting a classical, theological and literary tradition, the *collèges classiques* and universities trained the French Canadian élite, including priests who would reinforce and maintain the power of the Church. This also meant that the traditional views concerning women and their circumscribed role in society were maintained and strengthened.

The Church was strongly paternalistic and patriarchal in its ideology. Irénée Lussier, writing as late as 1960, observed that after the Church itself, the second cornerstone of Catholic philosophy was the family. According to Church ideology, the most virtuous roles for women were marriage and motherhood, and the development of devotions to the Virgin Mary in the mid-1800s fostered this belief. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception “validated, reflected and reinforced the dominant attitudes that were developing toward women in this period.”¹⁷ The education deemed most suitable for Catholic girls was that which would best equip them for their role in Quebec society, such as that available in the *instituts familiaux* in which “the cult of the home, the cult of the virtues of the true mistress of the household” were inculcated.¹⁸ This attitude towards women was not, however, confined to the Roman Catholic Church and French Quebec; it was the generally held view during the Victorian era. In Quebec it was enshrined in the Catholic education system and persisted for 25 years after female students were admitted to McGill University in 1870.

Instead of marriage, motherhood, or the uncertainties of a low-paying job, women did have the alternative of entering a religious order. It was in the best interests of the Church to encourage women in this, since the Church

¹⁵ Weber, Max, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Trans. by A.M. Henderson and T. Parsons. London: Collier-Macmillan, 1947, p. 328.

¹⁶ Audet, L.-P., *Le système scolaire de la province de Québec*. Tome 1. Québec: Les Editions de l’Erable, 1950, p. 65.

¹⁷ Danylewycz, op. cit., p. 41.

¹⁸ Lussier, I., *Roman Catholic Education and French Canada*. Toronto: W.J. Gage, 1960, p. 77.

required committed, dedicated personnel to staff the schools and to run the machinery of its various programmes of social welfare. Religious orders were bound to the Church by a vow of obedience. Thus the devotional revolution of the mid-1800s, the traditional views of women and the family, and the proliferation of religious orders all worked together to give the Church ultimate power over life in both French and English Catholic Quebec.

The Congregation of Notre Dame

Founded by Marguerite Bourgeoys in 1671, the Sisters of the Order of the Congregation of Notre Dame occupied a special place in the history of Quebec as the first teachers of children in the colony. By 1692 the Congregation had 14 schools in New France.¹⁹ In 1823, English was given place on the official programme of studies in the schools operated by the Order, and “the formal introduction of ... the English language found English-speaking pupils and English-speaking teachers awaiting this recognition of their mother-tongue.”²⁰ Several of the Order’s boarding schools, such as Villa Maria, had English-speaking sections.

As the Order expanded and diversified its education services during the 1800s, its administrative organization became large, complex and hierarchical. Divided into a number of religious ‘provinces’, each of which corresponded to the regional distribution of the Order’s schools, the Congregation was ruled by a Superior General and her governing council. Local and provincial superiors assisted the Superior General, supervised the day-to-day activities of the Sisters and ensured obedience to the Sacred Rule. As Marta Danylewycz observed, “Nothing was left to chance; every aspect of communal life was carefully codified. The process of standardization and centralization affecting late nineteenth-century social life had taken hold of the convent.”²¹ The Sisters belonged “to a well-disciplined and formally trained cadre whose spiritual and educational work was choreographed by

¹⁹ Sister St. Brendan, CND, *The English Language in the Congr gation de Notre Dame of Montreal From the 17th Century*. Unpublished Master’s Thesis, University of Montreal, 1939, pp. 3-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²¹ Danylewycz, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

a leadership intent on consolidating and expanding the community's wealth and power."²²

By the end of the 1800s, the Congregation controlled more educational institutions for girls than any other female order in Quebec and also had schools in the Maritimes, Ontario and several American states. At a time when women's opportunities were largely limited to marriage and motherhood and they were denied any voice in business or the professions, the women of the Congregation of Notre Dame were effective and influential administrators in the business of education.

The Founding of a College for Women

By the late 1800s, and despite strong resistance from the male hierarchy of the Church, a lay feminist movement was beginning to emerge in Quebec. Two of the Congregation's boarding schools, the Villa Maria and Mont Ste-Marie, became "the seedbeds of women's collegiate education and important centres of middle- and upper-class social feminism."²³ In these schools, girls received training in literature, sciences and arts. Also, by the end of her schooling, "[la jeune fille] joue agréablement le piano, [et] écrit sans fautes d'orthographe."²⁴ After this education, "ses seules préoccupations seront les caprices de la mode, l'attente des événements mondains et l'espoir d'un mari." The *Mémoire* concluded, however, "Mais à quelques jeunes filles, cela ne suffit pas."²⁵

Some of these young women became dissatisfied that no opportunity to continue their education existed unless they attended McGill or left home for the United States or France. In the convents they had learned about and often participated in the charitable and philanthropic work which was largely controlled by the religious women and integrated into the organizational structure of the Catholic Church. After finishing their education, lay women often worked in partnership with the Sisters as assistants in these charitable activities. Everywhere they saw the expansion of these activities as day-care centres, boarding homes for the aged, schools for the blind and deaf, temporary shelters for rural women and domestic science schools were established. In the 1880s, the Congregation of Notre Dame added typing and

²² Danylewycz, op. cit., pp. 19-20.

²³ Danylewycz, op. cit., p. 123.

²⁴ *Mémoire*, op. cit., p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

stenography to the curriculum in some of their academies. Everywhere, it seemed, services were being expanded to meet the changing needs of women; everywhere, that is, except in providing higher academic education for them.

Lay women began to agitate for a more active voice in the social, cultural and political life of Quebec and because of the association they had had with the Sisters in the convent schools, they saw themselves working in partnership with the female religious orders in expanding charitable work and improving social conditions. In 1893 a Montreal branch of the National Council of Women was established, and when a women's section of the Association St-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal was formed, its members turned their attention to educational matters. "Mais cette association a besoin de compétence, autant que de dévouement. Ses membres sentent le besoin d'une formation plus complète et pressent les Dames de la Congrégation de faire quelque chose dans ce domaine."²⁶ Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie and other leaders in advocating greater educational opportunity for women looked to the Congregation of Notre Dame to support the cause of higher education for women and to plead its case with Archbishop Paul Bruchési.

During these years of lay feminist agitation, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church along with politicians like Henri Bourassa ridiculed these women who, in the view of the Church, betrayed Church and family by embracing the feminist cause. Although many members of the Congregation of Notre Dame were sympathetic to feminist concerns about the lack of higher education for women, they were publicly silent on the issue. They were, after all, bound by vows of obedience to the Church hierarchy. Some Sisters, notably Sister Ste-Anne Marie, did, however, work within the Order to convince its members that higher education for women was advantageous, both in promoting religious vocations and in increasing the power and prestige of the Congregation of Notre Dame. Convincing the hierarchy of the Church was another matter.

In the early years of the 1900s, some small first steps were taken towards founding a college for Roman Catholic women. In 1904 Roman Catholic women won permission to audit literature courses at Laval University and the right to sit on the council of the National Library. Feminists like Robertine Barry kept up the pressure on the Congregation, urging the Sisters to revive the days when the convents were "breeding grounds of

²⁶ *Mémoire*, op. cit., p. 7.

learned women”²⁷ and to establish a women’s college so that young women would be equipped for university entrance. Lay women regularly met with the Congregation of Notre Dame, especially with Sister St-Anaclet, the Superior General. Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie published an outline of a tentative college curriculum in *Le Journal de Françoise* and kept reminding the Sisters that her daughter Marie, a student at Mont Ste-Marie Convent, would be going to university when she graduated in 1908 – if not in Quebec, then elsewhere in Canada, the United States or France.²⁸

Responding to this kind of pressure, the authorities of the Congregation, despite their reluctance to launch their community into what they perceived as a perilous adventure, sought the advice of Abbé (later Canon) Gauthier who supported them in the enterprise. He had earlier encouraged Sister Ste-Anne Marie, the principal of Mont Ste-Marie, to introduce philosophy, chemistry and law into the high school curriculum as groundwork for a women’s college.²⁹

Additional pressure came from the parents of English-speaking students at the Villa Maria Convent. These girls did not have a diploma at the collegial level, and thus were not qualified for university entrance. Parents asked the sisters to obtain, “une certification collégiale en bonne et due forme.”³⁰ These parental petitions were presented to the governing council of the Congregation.

Following a long internal debate, the Congregation sought affiliation with Laval University for Villa Maria for certain post-secondary courses.³¹ Armed with a letter from Archbishop Bruchési, who at times seemed sympathetic to the cause of higher education for women, two Sisters of the Order had an interview on July 4, 1904, with Mgr. Mathieu, the Rector of Laval University. They pointed out that “quelques jeunes filles vont chercher un supplément de bagage intellectuel à l’Université McGill.”³² The request

²⁷ Plante, Sister L., CND. *L’enseignement classique chez les soeurs de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame, 1908-1971*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Laval University, Québec, 1971.

²⁸ Pelletier-Baillargeon, H., “Marie Gérin-Lajoie,” in M. Lavigne & Y. Pinard (eds.), *Travailleuses et féministes: Les femmes dans la société québécoise*. Montreal: Boréal Express, 1983, p. 114.

²⁹ Plante, op. cit., p. 46.

³⁰ Pelletier-Baillargeon, *ibid.*, p. 114.

³¹ Archives, Congregation of Notre Dame, *Les annales du Collège Marguerite Bourgeoys*, Tome 1 (1908).

³² *Mémoire*, op. cit., p. 8.

was then referred to the Department of Public Instruction and thence to the Catholic Committee, which judged that the time was not ripe to have young women pursue higher studies. The *Mémoire* observed, “Il faut dire que les préjugés étaient alors nombreux et bien enracinés.”³³ Stung by this rejection, the Congregation dropped the project for the time being.

Sister Ste-Anne Marie was not content with abandoning her dream indefinitely. She pressed the Order’s General Council from 1904 to 1908 to keep pursuing the project of a college for women, but she met with little enthusiasm. The General Council saw that such a need might very well arise in the future, but mindful of the failed attempt of Villa Maria to procure an affiliation with Laval University for certain courses only, they decided there was no urgency. Internal division in the Order also delayed matters. While some Sisters were supportive, others were outraged by Sister Ste-Anne Marie’s ‘modernism’ and disapproved also of the changes she had made at Mont Ste-Marie.³⁴

In 1906, after lengthy internal debate, Sister Ste-Anne Marie was authorized by the General Council of the Order to explore possibilities with Archbishop Bruchési, whose support was essential. Although he had shown himself favourably disposed to women’s concerns, he nevertheless was indecisive about a proposal regarding a college for women. “Mgr. Bruchési se contentera de faire aux deux femmes [Sister Ste-Anne Marie et Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie] l’éloge plutôt évasif de la culture féminine et de son influence bienfaisante dans la famille et la société.”³⁵ All major educational decisions involving religious communities rested in the hands of the Archbishop, and without his approval, no steps could be taken by the Order towards founding a classical college.

The Archbishop’s vacillation ended abruptly on April 25, 1908, when headlines in a Montreal newspaper, *La Patrie*, announced the September 1908 opening in Montreal of a non-denominational *lycée* for young women, with its programs and education philosophy imported from France. Both the Archbishop and the Congregation of Notre Dame reacted with alarm. The General Mistress of Studies for the Order indicated the following day that the General Council was ready to act and that the Sisters might inform Archbishop Bruchési of this, should they have the opportunity to do so.³⁶ Sister Ste-Anne Marie lost no time in arranging to see the Archbishop, who

³³ *Mémoire*, op. cit., p. 8.

³⁴ Plante, op. cit., pp. 50-52.

³⁵ Pelletier-Baillargeon, op. cit., p. 115.

³⁶ *Les annales du Collège Marguerite-Bourgeois*, Tome 1, 1908.

this time was favourably disposed to a classical college for women under the direction of the Congregation of Notre Dame. Without the threat of a non-denominational *lycée* under lay control over his head, it is doubtful that Archbishop Bruchési would have given his permission so quickly, such was the resistance in both Church and French-Canadian society to higher academic education for Quebec's women.

The Sisters presented plans for a dual French and English institution to be housed in the new Mother House and for a four-year baccalaureate program modelled on that offered in the male classical colleges. On June 16, 1908, the Archbishop gave his full approval, expressing his wish that the parallel institutions should open within a year, observing that "True learning will harm no one ... [but] will contribute to the formation ... of strong women which our society definitely needs."³⁷

Responding to mixed reactions from both members of the Congregation and the clergy, and to the silence of the Sulpicians who had been long standing advisers to the Congregation, the Archbishop began to rethink his position and proposed to the Congregation that they wait several years before opening the college. Canon Gauthier warned the Sisters that if the Congregation were to withdraw from or delay the project, he was certain that they would miss out entirely and that another order would go ahead with a college for young women. Following his advice, the Sisters held firm with Archbishop Bruchési, who finally advised Sister Ste-Anne Marie to prepare an article for *Semaine Religieuse* announcing the opening of the new dual college and explaining the function of *L'Ecole supérieure d'enseignement pour les jeunes filles* and its parallel English institution, Notre Dame Collegiate Institute.³⁸ In September, 1908, the Rector of Laval University informed Sister Ste-Anne Marie that both institutions had been affiliated with the Montreal campus of Laval University by decision of the University Council. Sister Ste-Anne Marie was appointed as the first Directress of *L'Ecole* and Sister St. Agnes Romaine as Dean of the English college.

Both the French- and English-speaking institutions had as their aim, "The training of students who in their future sphere will be distinguished for scholarship and womanly culture and emphatically [sic] for firm and

³⁷ *Les annales du Collège Marguerite-Bourgeoys*, Tome 1, 1908. Trans. Sister Marion Noonan.

³⁸ In 1909 this name was changed to Notre Dame Ladies College, the first of five name changes that the English part of the college was to undergo during its history.

uncompromising catholicity combined with the attractive grace of virtue.”³⁹ The official administration of the new college included the Superior General of the Order, the General Mistress of Studies, the Directress of *L'Ecole* and another Sister from the college appointed by the Superior General. In practice the latter-mentioned member was the Dean of Notre Dame Ladies College. The Vice-Rector of Laval University was appointed to attend all meetings on a consultative basis. A special Consultative Commission composed of three faculty members, two alumnae, the Directress, and the Vice-Rector of Laval as Chairman, all prescribed according to a specific formula, could be called as occasion warranted, but ultimate decision-making power rested with the official administration in consultation with Laval University authorities and the Archbishop.

In a ceremony attended by leading figures of the clergy, the Congregation of Notre Dame, the Quebec government, and both French and English society, the first classical college for women in Quebec was officially opened October 8, 1908. Thus began a long tradition of postsecondary education for women in Quebec. The Congregation of Notre Dame, the first educators of early New France, took their rightful place in providing a much needed service to Quebec's young women, who finally had equal opportunity with men to gain higher education within the Catholic tradition.

³⁹ Archives, Marianopolis College, A.11.08.