

## PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province • Providence Health & Services

*Editor's note:* In honor of the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Sisters of Providence (1843-2018), the Archives staff took a look back at how the Sisters celebrated anniversaries in the past. In this issue of *Past Forward* we examine celebrations of the seventh (1850), 25<sup>th</sup> (1868) and 50<sup>th</sup> (1893) anniversaries of the religious community. Subsequent issues of the newsletter will discuss celebrations at 75 (1918), 100 (1943), 125 (1993), and finally, 175 years. We hope you enjoy these essays along with images from Providence Archives collections. Small historical exhibits on the anniversaries are on display at Providence Archives, Seattle; Providence St. Joseph Health office, Renton; and Mount St. Joseph, Spokane. –PS

## To Examine the Past and Foresee the Future

Loretta Greene

Jubilee! A time of celebration, remembrance and thanksgiving. On March 25, 2018, the Sisters of Providence began a year of celebration of the blessings given and received in the past 175 years throughout the Congregation and its ministries, and welcomed the future with hope.

Our review of the Community anniversaries revealed that each was celebrated in similar ways with days of prayer and thanksgiving, novenas, published histories, pageants and essay contests, special donations to the needy, and food drives. However, world events such as the 1918 influenza and two world wars affected the level of festivities.

### Seventh, 1850

It may seem unusual to celebrate a seventh anniversary, but for Bishop Ignace Bourget, founder of the Sisters of Providence, and for the sisters themselves, it held spiritual and symbolic importance. In 1850, the Community was in its seventh year of existence and Bishop Bourget deemed it worthy to mark the event, linking it to the biblical seventh year jubilee to “put aside earthly preoccupations to fix their minds on the joys of heaven.” After seven short years, there were 48 living sisters and seven established ministries. Mother Emilie Gamelin and her companion foundresses were all living. A young Sister Joseph (later Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart) was professed only three years and in charge of making habits, working with wax, and caring for sick sisters.

The Sisters of Providence celebrated this anniversary privately. Their annual week-long retreat was held March 13 to 22, to inaugurate the jubilee year. Bishop Bourget delivered his sermon to the young community, identifying several grace-filled events based on the number seven. The number was symbolic in several ways: devotion to Our Lady of Seven Sorrows; seven original sisters in the community; only seven sisters having passed away; and the community’s promise to burn seven candles on the first Friday of each month in thanksgiving for deliverance from typhus. At the conclusion of the retreat, the bishop entreated the Sisters to remember

### ALLOCUTION

AUX SŒURS DE LA PROVIDENCE,  
A L'OCCASION DU 25<sup>ÈM</sup> ANNIVERSAIRE DE L'ÉTABLISSEMENT DE  
LEUR COMMUNAUTÉ.

NOS TRÈS-CHÈRES FILLES.

Il y a, comme vous le savez, des jours que le Seigneur, dans son infinie bonté, nous ménage tout spécialement, pour nous combler de plus de grâces. Ce sont des jours de recueillement, où l'on médite plus sérieusement les années passées; des jours de miséricorde, où l'on est plus touché de ses infidélités; des jours de componction, où les larmes de la pénitence coulent plus abondantes; des jours de lumières, où les saintes vérités brillent d'un nouvel éclat; des jours de joie, où l'on oublie toutes les peines de la vie et où l'on se retrempe, pour marcher d'un pas plus ferme, dans les sentiers de la perfection.

*Allocution of Bishop Bourget, 1868*

that what they gave up for religious life will rest in accomplishments through the will of God, and that “The principal fruit of this jubilee will be for you to renew yourselves in the spirit of your holy Rules.”

### Twenty-Fifth, 1868

The works of the Sisters of Providence branched out in unexpected ways in the 18 years between the seventh and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In 1851, cholera again struck Montreal claiming Mother Gamelin as a victim. Two groups of Sisters were missioned to the Pacific Northwest, but Providence had other plans for one group. In 1852, Mother Bernarda and four companions traveled to the Northwest, but due to unforeseen circumstances established themselves in Valparaiso, Chile. The second group, led by Mother Joseph, successfully established the religious community in Vancouver, Washington Territory in 1856. In 1858, the first edition of the Customary Rules was printed. And in 1864, Bishop Bourget established the Third Order of the Servites of Mary, later called Coadjutrix sisters. By the silver anniversary celebration in March 1868, there were 200 living Sisters of Providence and 22 active ministries in North America.

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In Montreal, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary was a public celebration uniting both religious and lay. The oldest members of the original Ladies of Charity, a few of them family relations to Mother Gamelin, joined the Sisters for a jubilee dinner. Although details are scant, there were similarities with the seventh celebration. The annual retreat opened on March 16 and closed on March 25, anniversary of the first reception of the Holy Habit by the seven original Sisters of Providence. On the closing day, Bishop Bourget delivered

separation and longing to be united with the Sisters in Montreal: "It is during these little family celebrations that the poor Missionary feels most profoundly her exile and the distance from those who are dear to her. But, is it not in isolation that the heart is most tender?" What did the Vancouver sisters wish for the future? "May our little company continue to multiply! And, through the centuries, may it never lose the spirit bequeathed by its first members! The spirit of Humility, Simplicity and Charity."



*At the Mother House in Montreal, sisters gathered for a photograph to memorialize the 50th anniversary. In front from left are: superior general Mother Marie Godfrey; three surviving foundresses Sr. Immaculate Conception, Sr. Zotique, and Sr. Mary of the Seven Dolors; and Sr. Marie Hippolyte, mistress of novices. Joining these professed Sisters are 57 novices and postulants. Image courtesy Providence Archives, Montreal.*

an *Allocution* (address) recounting the birth of the community, its trials and successes: "The cradle of the community...is the summit of Calvary, which is a mountain of myrrh by its bitterness, and a hill of incense by its agreeable fragrance ... You have surmounted enormous difficulties, struggled against terrible epidemics – cholera and typhus ... Notwithstanding all this, you have treaded with firm, unwavering step...toward your final goal." Looking at the future of the community, Bourget closed with ten exhortations, including "Prove your love for the poor by thinking of them night and day... by making it your delight to relieve their distress...by making use of the thousand and one ways which true charity inspires for their betterment."

In the five ministries in the Northwest, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary is mentioned only in the chronicles of Providence Academy, Vancouver. The annalist recorded an annual retreat and renewal of vows, but the greater part of her anniversary entry reflects on feelings of

### **Fiftieth, 1893**

In his 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary *Allocution*, Bishop Bourget stated that "Twenty-five years from today, you will again compare the actual state of your Institute then with the present ... For, it is to be supposed that the Community, at the close of each quarter of a century, will recollect itself as you have done to examine the past and foresee the future."

Celebrations and mementoes for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sisters of Providence were as Bishop Bourget directed. Grand festivities were planned for the Mother House in Montreal: three days of thanksgiving (known as a *triduum*); published histories; alms for the poor; commemorative historical paintings; and pageants. Because Lent conflicted with the actual March 25 date, the triduum was postponed until June 5 to 7. Ministries throughout the community could choose a favorable day from June 7 through the end of the year. In some cases, the observation was determined by school schedules, staffing needs, and smallpox quarantine .

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This celebration was much more organized, inclusive, and public than the 25<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps the significant events that had occurred in the intervening years impacted both the solemnity and joy of the occasion. The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mother Gamelin's death was remembered in 1876. The sisters cared for smallpox victims during three epidemics in 1872, 1878, and 1885. In 1880, after years of painful governance disputes in Chile, the sisters there separated from Montreal forming the independent Congregation of the Sisters of Providence in Chile. In 1885, Bishop Ignace Bourget, founder of the religious community, died. In 1887, the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Seven Dolors was founded, allowing deaf women to enter religious life. After decades of some uncertainty regarding their rules, an 1889 revision of the Constitutions was approved for 10 years (for a history of the Constitutions, see our Winter 2017-2018 issue), and in 1891 the expansive works and number of sisters were divided into seven provinces. By this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary there were 706 living Sisters of Providence and 59 active ministries. The community had suffered losses and trials, but had emerged stronger, more organized, and with more sisters and ministries to carry on their mission.

#### *Montreal celebrates*

The three days of thanksgiving in Montreal opened on June 5 with each day honoring a different group. The chapel at the Mother House on Fullum Street was decorated with seven banners, representing the foundresses, hung from the columns within. Seven floral crowns of roses and lilies were suspended from the choir, and the chapel was described as "a true garden" filled with 25 colorful bouquets from the new greenhouses at St. John of God Hospital. The niche above the altar was ornamented with a large "50" in lights.

The High Mass on the first day was dedicated to the poor and the homily focused on the religious community's motto, The Charity of Christ Urges Us. Afterward, a banquet was served to the poor in a dining room beautifully decorated with banners. On June 6 at the Asile of Providence, the original mother house on St. Catherine Street, a High Mass honored the benefactors of the Institute and deceased Sisters of Providence. Two directives from Jesus formed the basis of the homily: "The poor you always have with you," and "Whatever you do for the least of them, you do for me." The evening banquet and entertainment was enjoyed at Saint Alexis Orphanage with honors and gifts presented to the three remaining foundresses. On the final day, June 7, the celebration returned to the Mother House on Fullum Street where flags flew from the rooftop. Edward Fabre, archbishop of Montreal and a long-time supporter of the religious community, celebrated the Pontifical Mass. His homily was based on the words "Go, sell what you have and follow me." As this was the final day of the triduum of thanksgiving, the chapel was filled with representatives from other women religious communities, clergy, doctors, and prominent officials as well as members of the public. Finally, the cornerstone for a new hospice for the elderly poor was blessed. The Sisters of Providence viewed this new ministry, Hospice Gamelin, as their memorial of the golden jubilee.

#### *Honored guests*

This golden anniversary was the last attended by individuals who were intimately associated with the foundation of the Institute. Only three of the seven original foundresses were alive to celebrate the day: Sister Immaculate Conception, Sister Zotique, and Sister Mary of the Seven Dolors. All passed away within the following fifteen months. Among other well-known clergy, two prominent individuals attended: Monseigneur Charles Prince, the spiritual advisor and later ecclesiastical superior to the community, and an uncle of Sister Praxedes, one of Mother Joseph's companions in 1856; and



*Bishop Bourget Blessing the Seven Foundresses by Sr. Marie-David*

Archbishop Fabre. Also honored was Luce Perrault Fabre who held three distinctions: mother of the archbishop, a relative of Emilie Gamelin, and the sole surviving foundress of the Ladies of Charity. A few of Mother Gamelin's great-nieces also attended.

The level of participation by sisters outside of Montreal was different with this anniversary. Sister representatives came from each province, providing they could pay their own travel expenses. One representative from Vancouver, Washington, was Sister Vincent de Paul, one of Mother Joseph's companions, who had not returned to Montreal since her departure in 1856. Other sisters from the west included Sister Mary Alexander, representing American-born women who had entered the novitiate in Vancouver; Sisters Pacifique and Rodrigue, representing the province of Oregon; and Sisters Peter Baptiste and Marie Wilfrid representing the Rocky Mountain ministries in Montana.

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These sisters from the distant western provinces brought gifts for the three foundress mothers whom they held close in their hearts. The Vancouver sisters brought a gold spoon for Sister Zoticque, a gold pen with mother-of-pearl handle for Sister Immaculate Conception, and a small gold cross for Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours. The Oregon province sisters brought a small pot of money for each foundress and the Montana sisters brought a gold chalice. (Archives has inquired about these gifts in the General Administration but unfortunately they are not part of the museum's collections.)

#### *Commemoratives*

In keeping with Bishop Bourget's directive to examine the past, historical paintings and published histories are the lasting commemoratives of this golden anniversary. Sister Marie-David (Louise Benoit, 1845-1930) was an accomplished artist who created three paintings representing historical moments of the community. These paintings have lived up to their goal as a commemorative as they are the only representations of these historic events. They are: *Bishop Bourget Blessing the Seven Foundresses*; *Mother Gamelin with Dodais*; and *Historical Tree of the Institute*, with seven branches representing the seven provinces drawing life from a common trunk, the Mother House.

Two commemorative publications were produced that year: *Jubile D'Or Notes Historiques (Golden Jubilee Historical Notes)* is a record of important events presented in a calendar format; and *Cinquanteenaire...Fetes Jubilaires (Fiftieth...Jubilee Celebrations)*, is a detailed account of the celebrations for the year.

Within the religious community, the general council gave a special gift to current and future novices: They received the unexpected surprise of the modification of their habit, partially returning it to the style (except color and slight modification of the garniture) worn by Mother Gamelin and the foundresses. Their current black cape was returned to the original white with two fanons of white linen fastened to the cape in the back. In 1874, for reasons of economy, the white cape and fanons worn since 1843 had been replaced with the black cape of the professed sisters.

#### **Anniversaries to Come**

The next two anniversary celebrations were the 75<sup>th</sup> in 1918 and the grand centennial in 1943, both affected by major world events. During these years, the religious community grew significantly and had great impact on health care, education and social services in North America. Join us in the next issue of *Past Forward* as we continue to reflect on Providence jubilees.

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