
A TRIBUTE TO THE RELIGIOUS HOSPITALLERS OF SAINT JOSEPH



In October we had the pleasure of marking the one hundred thirtieth anniversary of the coming of the first Hospitallers of Saint Joseph to Saint Basile. What an event that was! I want to pay tribute to and congratulate the Congregation's pioneers, and assure the members today of my continued prayer and solidarity with them. The reasons for the Sisters' founding the Hotel Dieu in 1873 are still the same today: the care for the poor and needy, and the evangelisation of families.

RETURN TO THE ROOTS

If knowledge of the story of our country is a valuable inheritance, the same holds true of our families, parishes, and religious communities. At the onset of every apostolic endeavour there are apostolic attitudes common to apostles and initiators of these projects: there is boldness, courage, and determination, for the greater glory of God. At the very beginning of the Religious Hospitallers of Saint Joseph's apostolic project there was plenty of boldness, courage, and determination. Could anything have deterred them from their apostolate to the needy and the sick! Could anything have deterred them from their mission of education? Nothing! When the first Religious Hospitallers arrived at Saint Basile, on October 4, 1873, there were only four parishes in the Madawaska. The mother-parish of Saint Basile had been founded in 1789, and its territory extended all the way to Fredericton. In 1859 a second parish, Saint-François, was founded. Then there were Saint-Léonard-Parent and Grand Falls in 1868, and Saint-Hilaire in 1869. At the time, Edmundston was a simple mission station, as were Sainte-Anne, Saint-Jacques, and Maliseet. The total population of the Madawaska region numbered seven thousand; Saint Basile had fewer than 1700 people. There were only six priests for the entire territory. The Sisters of Charity of Saint John had left Saint Basile in the spring of 1873, hospitals were next to non-existent, and schools fared no better. Poverty and even misery had free rein, in the region. A new law had been voted in New Brunswick against confessional schools; there would henceforth be only "Godless schools", as the first Sisters called them.

RUMOURS

It was quite astonishing that a cloistered, enclosed order of nuns appear, in such a context. Even without benefit of fast food places and take-outs or shopping centres, rumours had started making the rounds. Rumour had it that the Sisters who were coming from Montreal were quite rich, that if they wanted to get their belongings waiting at Rivière-du-Loup, all they had to do was hire someone to get them. People had no idea that behind their convent walls there was little or no food, and not even any heat... There was no furniture besides a few broken benches which had not yet been repaired. Everything had to be done, from mending relationships to filling material needs. Even with the parish priest there were hard times... Nevertheless, Mother Davignon, the Superior, was convinced that their mission was the will of God, and that they would succeed despite opposition. The death of the first Superior on February 2, 1874, was a terrible blow to the young community, but these pioneer women had a wonderful faith, and exemplary boldness and creativeness.

SIMILAR SITUATIONS?

If you can, think often of the beginnings of our institutions. I am certain that our stories are at the source of new beginnings. Today's situations are as challenging, and the challenges, as formidable as then. It is true that material situations have greatly changed, but it still remains true that in faith education and health care, there are enormous challenges confronting us. Pastoral readjustments are also a concern: there are fifteen pastoral teams ministering to thirty-two parishes, to a population which is eight times what it was in 1873. The Religious Hospitallers have much to teach us, and I have adapted to them the words of Jacques Grand'maison: "They have so much to teach us, these hardy pioneers. In a rock-splitting cold region, their human warmth is a living tribute. Do you think that there is no more room for these blessed witnesses of lasting values, these poets of our childhood dreams, these watchers after our youthful energies? No more room for these saints of noble daily life, these optimists in the midst of our doubts? Like the old pine tree on the front lawn, there is an eternal "je ne sais quoi" about you. The memory of you gives life to our history. We need you, you evening companions."

CONTINUE BUILDING...

Mother Louise-Virginie D'Avignon, Sister Catherine Guérin, Sister Joséphine Brissette, Sister Philomène Descôteaux, Sister Alphonsine Ranger (Sister Maillet), Sister Alphonsine Collette, Sister Rachel Chapleau, today more, even, than in 1873, thanks to this communion of saints which unites us, you can still help us continue building our beloved Church. You can help us with the wonderful task of the faith education of children and adults, youth and elderly. We must not stop showing through our words and actions the Father's love which Jesus revealed to us. We still need women and men of the Gospel, people with hearts afire, passionate about Jesus Christ, united to him and living from his resurrected life, in a world that is more and more secular, in a world that finds it more and more difficult to discern the real human and Christian values. So many today need being affirmed, supported in their faith and charity. We more than ever need witnesses who can contribute to the establishment of family and youth ministry, The Religious Hospitallers, who have done so much for the children, orphans, and families of the Madawaska, can help set up this ministry, basis of society and of the Church. We hope that family liturgies will help family members better celebrate their faith in the Risen One and solve the hurts of daily life. Let the children come to Jesus: "Do not hinder them. The kingdom of God belongs to such as these. The one who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a child is not worthy of the kingdom."

SISTER MAILLET

Through their prayer and contacts the Religious Hospitallers can more than ever before help discern those who could take on pastoral responsibilities within our parish communities. Vocation ministry is most urgently needed, if we are to have living, life-giving, and missionary communities. I urge you to read and re-read the letter written September 18, 1876, by Sister Maillet to Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montreal: at that time, even, she had put the finger on the challenges to be met, those of Christian education, the elimination of poverty, vocations to their religious community, and priests for the parish.

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