

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES PROVINCE OF THE INSTITUTE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY (LORETTO SISTERS)¹

Like India, the North American Institute was started by the Irish branch of the Institute during the lifetime and term of Mother Teresa Ball. Five sisters from Ireland were sent to Toronto, Canada, at the request of Bishop Michael Power to minister to Irish immigrants. They arrived there on September 16, 1847.² The five sisters were Mother Ignatia Hutchinson (the eldest of the group and the superior), Sr. Berchman Hutchinson (Mother Ignatia's younger sister), Mother Mary Gertrude Fleming, Sr. Bonaventure Phelan and Sr. Teresa Dease.³ These five sisters arrived in Toronto during a typhus outbreak, and without Bishop Power knowing of their impending arrival. Mother Teresa Ball's letter notifying the bishop that five sisters were embarking from Dublin to Toronto had not yet reached him. As a result, no preparations had been made regarding where the sisters would live. They were given hospitality at the home of the Lynn family. The father and his sons moved to a hotel while the sisters were there. Shortly, however, a home was found for the sisters, and they began teaching at a day school. Tragically, Bishop Power succumbed to the typhus shortly after.⁴

The sisters, however, were busy starting their first school, which opened on September 29, 1847. This was a difficult time for the sisters. Bishop Power and the Lynn family were their only supporters. Plus, they were not equipped to handle the bitter cold of their first Canadian winter. The physical strain of the winter in addition to being penniless and in a different country took a toll on their health. Also the chimney in the house in which they were living exploded, so they had to move to new housing.⁵

The first Canadian postulant joined on May 8, 1849, Sr. Joseph Quinn. This was a cause of great celebration. However the Canadian weather and continued outbreaks of illnesses in Toronto were wearing at the health of the Irish sisters. In 1850, Sister Gertrude died. Several weeks later, Mother Ignatia also died, leaving the small group of sisters without a superior. Sr. Valentina Hutchinson "suffered a collapse after the death of her sister." With her health failing, she was sent home to Ireland. This left only two of the original five sisters left with four other sisters: the postulant, Sr. Joseph McNamara and additional sisters who had arrived from Ireland (Mother Joachim Murray, Sisters Ita Cummins and Charlotte Lynn. There were not enough sisters to maintain the boarding school, and so it was closed until the next term would begin.⁶

With the death of the superior, Mother Ignatia, the current bishop of Toronto, Bishop de Charbonnel, had no choice but to appoint an interim superior, until the official superior could be named by Mother Teresa Ball. Correspondence between Canada and Ireland traveled by ship and took several weeks to travel each way. Mother Teresa Dease was named the new

¹ In North America, Loretto is customarily spelled with two "t"s

² McGovern, Kathleen, IBVM, *Something More Than Ordinary* (Ontario, Canada: The I Team, 1989), 69.

³ United States Province Archives.

⁴ McGovern, 83-84, 86-87 90.

⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁶ Ibid., 95, 104.

superior on March 19, 1851. It is Mother Teresa Dease who is considered to be the founder of the North American Branch of the Institute.⁷

The Beginnings of the Institute in the United States

The Beginnings of the Institute in the United States, it was not until 1880 that Mother Teresa felt that she could venture south of the Canadian border. She received two requests from priests for help with parish schools, Father Walter Power (St. Patrick Parish) and Father Maurice Burke (St. Mary Parish). Both parishes were in Joliet, Illinois, over 500 miles distant from Toronto, and part of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Therefore sending sisters there would raise new challenges for the Institute: a different country with different laws and customs as well as a different school system. Also, the archdiocese was without a bishop at that time which also meant that the new archbishop may have different views of Canadian sisters teaching in American schools⁸.

Mother Teresa considered all these risks and still decided to open the Institute house and school in the United States. She arrived in Joliet on August 30, 1880, with three sisters: Gonzaga Galivan, the superior; Dosithia Gibney and Lidwina Doyle. The parish school opened during the first week in September and the academy opened on September 8, 1880. At that time two more sisters arrived from Toronto: Bathilde McBride and Mother Agnes McKenna⁹.

By spring, 1881, the diocese had a new archbishop, Patrick Feehan, ordered that the Loretto sisters should reside in St. Mary Parish instead of St. Patrick Parish since the former parish was the larger of the two. St. Mary's Convent and Academy opened in 1882 and was chartered by the State of Illinois and accredited with De Kalb Normal School. Its graduates were "eligible to take the examination for a teaching certificate."¹⁰ Over the next several years, Loretto sisters expanded to two additional schools in Joliet: St. Bernard's and Sacred Heart. These were the last schools to be founded by Mother Teresa Dease.

She had faced increasing challenges once the Institute expanded into the United States. It became more difficult to negotiate with two archbishops, each in a different country, and a third bishop in a different state. However it was the Archbishop of Dublin that first triggered the idea of the North American foundations become a separate Generalate. After Mother Teresa Ball's death, Archbishop Cullen of Dublin decreed that all Institute houses in Dublin would be governed by the General Superior. Almost two decades later, all of the Institute houses outside of Ireland were given the choice to continue to belong to the Irish Generalate, or to form their own Generalate. Almost two decades later, with much correspondence between Toronto and Dublin, the decision was made that the Loretto Houses in North America should become their own Generalate. "By Papal Decree dated April 25, 1881 the North American Branch of the Institute came into existence as a third generalate, and Mother Teresa Dease became its first Chief Superior."¹¹ This new Branch would have two regions: Canada and the United States.

⁷ Ibid., 107-110.

⁸ Ibid., 179-180.

⁹ Ibid., 180.

¹⁰ Ibid., 181

¹¹ Ibid., 183

After the death of Mother Teresa Dease, in 1889, additional schools were founded and the North American Branch of Loretto sisters moved to other parts of Illinois and the United States. Another three academies and one high school were built: Loretto-Englewood (1892-1972) and Loretto-Woodlawn (1905-1985), both located in Chicago, Illinois. St. Mary's Academy in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, opened in 1896 and closed almost 100 years later in 1985. Loretto High School opened in 1955 in Sacramento, California. It closed in 2009.¹²

In addition to the academies, Loretto sisters have served in parish schools in Chicago and its environs, Michigan, California, Arizona, and New Jersey. During the years between 1950 and 1969, many parishes closed their schools. During these times the sisters adapted to new social needs and serve wherever there was a need they could fill. They worked in parish ministry, social services and other disciplines. They worked nationally in Florida, Tennessee, Michigan, Wisconsin, California, Arizona, Illinois and Alaska. Internationally they have worked in Tanzania, India and Slovakia.

After over one hundred years of separation, the Irish and North American branches began a journey of reunification starting in 1996 that would last several years. In 2003, the two branches reunited forming the Loretto Branch with each of the former regions becoming the Canadian Province and the United States Province.

¹² Ibid., 181, United States Archives