

The Ladies of Loretto Come to Joliet in 1880

In April of 1880, the Reverend W. H. Power of Joliet, who had known the Sisters in Hamilton, Ontario, wrote to Mother Terese Dease in Toronto asking her to send the Ladies of Loretto to teach the Irish immigrant children of St. Patrick's parish. Trying to persuade Mother Teresa, he said, "We have \$2,000 in hand to start. A fair could be gotten up in the fall which would realize between \$3,000 and \$4,000, that is, provided it was known that your community was coming, or better still, if the Sisters were here to encourage it by their presence. Rock is very cheap here... a good building that would do for some time could be put up for \$10,000. By the time it is finished you would be, say \$4,000 in debt, perhaps not even \$3,000—money can be had for 6% interest.

The offer was accepted, and in August of 1880, Mother Teresa and three Sisters arrived in Joliet and went to the house Father Power had provided for the Sisters. Mother Teresa related, "Great was the good pastor's surprise to find they had come to found a mission almost penniless, having seen their convents in Canada and having known nothing of the poverty of their foundations. On the other hand, Reverend Mother was a little surprised herself that the house was completely without furniture and furnishings! On her homeward journey, as she stood at one of the houses of the order and looked over the surrounding country, she pointed to a small house in the middle of an uncultivated field, broke silence and tears gathered in her eyes as she said, "In a place something like that I left the nuns."

The Sisters took possession of the little convent and taught at St. Patrick's School in the basement of the church with twenty-five pupils, boys and girls, whose numbers increased daily. They were soon faced with the winter of 1880-81 which was the worst in twenty-five years. During part of that season people were obliged to have recourse to ladders from the second story for "egress" owing to the snowdrifts. The Sisters were obliged to go into debt to buy

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“necessaries”, probably long woolen underwear. Then came the spring thaws, and the streets were flooded. The people were compelled to use boats to get around.

The following year the Sisters moved from St. Patrick’s parish to St. Mary’s where they moved into a house rented for them by Father Burke, the pastor. The rent was \$420 a year. Some of the Sisters walked to St. Patrick’s each day to teach the students there. At St. Mary’s the number of boarding students increased so rapidly that the nuns had to give up their cells and convert classrooms into dormitories for the night. Before the bell rang for morning meditation, they had to leave shiny well-aired classrooms for the pupils. By 1883 the Sisters had moved into their new convent in St. Mary’s Academy with over 200 pupils.

One of these pupils in the boarding school in 1894 was Minnie Moore, the mother of Sister Mary Clare Mracek, IBVM. Sister recorded her mother’s story from their conversations.

“Her father brought his motherless curly red head to this holy house. To the trembling little girl who had been reared by well meaning, but misinformed relatives, the door opened upon an institution of trap doors and back stairways. The gentle Sister Theodosia, who greeted us, could do little to allay those fears, even when she removed my bonnet to pat my carefully made curls. It would only have been the expected, if the bonnet and kid gloves had evaporate into thin air! But little Sister Regina, the motherly refectorian, remembered by so many for an extra piece of soft buttered toast or some jelly bread, tendered at ten and four o’clock, helped to dissipate the nonsense that had been instilled.”

“Sister Hildegarde always tried to make our recreations happy and pleasant. Boarding school girls are usually anxious to hear something of the childhood days of the nuns, and to satisfy this curiosity about her, told us this bit. Her birthday coincided with the birthday of Queen Victoria. Sister would awake to hear bands playing, feet marching, and see festivity on every

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side. This meant to her, in her early years, only the celebration of her birthday. And so, we learned the great secret: Sister Hildegarde's birthday was the 24th of May."

"It is hard to express the emotion that welled up in my mind and heart, when coming from the station, even after a short week-end, the cupola of St. Mary's looming before me assured me that soon I would be at home again; that the heavy front door would open, and just inside would be one of the dear nuns. I still remember how fresh her veil and linens looked, how sweet her expression, and how happy I was to receive her kiss of welcome."

"One time in particular, school had already begun, so I hurried eagerly to the door of the classroom that I knew would be mine for the coming year. In answer to my tap, a dignified and stately nun came to the door. She truly merited the title we gave her-Her Majesty-for she was royal in soul as in her bearing. To me she was then, and always, just my mother." Her Majesty was also known as Mother Canisia Tivoney.

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