

Love Spans the Centuries Volume IV - Pages 187-195

St Anne's Orphanage, Worcester, MA USA 1891

Origin and Development of the Institute of the Sisters of Charity of Montreal, Grey Nuns

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to over five hundred patients which the hospital was able to accommodate after the successive expansions.

ST. ANNE'S ORPHANAGE, WORCESTER, U.S.A., 1891

Father J. Brouillet, the pastor of the francophone parish in Worcester, Mass. had appealed to the Grey Nuns in 1884 in order to obtain their services for the establishment of an orphanage. The reply had been affirmative, but the project had to be postponed in favor of other projects previously accepted. The delay was deplored by the pastor, and five years later he encouraged the plan of "Young Ladies of the Third Order" to transform the building used as a school chapel in South Worcester into a shelter "for thirty-five orphans and five elderly persons."³²

The initiative failed and the group dissolved. Several of them came together again elsewhere and persisted in living together as a community despite the interdiction from competent authority. This was complicated by the fact that these young women had obtained their charter of civic incorporation which guaranteed them the sharing of common goods.³³ They left the orphanage on Southgate Street where there were now seventy-eight orphans as well as elderly and handicapped persons. Father Brouillet renewed his appeal to the Grey Nuns. He was so persuasive that two days later, on January 30, 1891, the Superior General took the foundresses to Worcester. They were Sisters Anna Piché, St. Georges, Poitevin and Ste. Hedwidge: four Sisters carefully chosen.

Sister Piché was thirty years old and had less than ten years of religious life, but already despite her frail

³² Le Livre d'Or, - A. Belisle, p. 72.

³³ The situation would stabilize however and from this small group would come a worthy religious community.

appearance, she was known as a strong woman, a woman with a great heart, one of whom any sacrifice could be asked. Impressed by the courage of the 'heroic women of the far North' the young lady had once declared she wanted "to be a Grey Nun in order to experience extreme deprivation". Her wish would be fulfilled in Worcester where the sympathy of the population was divided between the Tertiaries and the Grey Nuns.³⁴

The early period of their stay appeared glorious, for the elite of society welcomed the daughters of Mother d'Youville most cordially. The reception took place at the Casino where the speaker stated that

even though the faces of the new arrivals are not familiar, the brilliant renown of your community has reached us here. As we left the shores of the St. Lawrence, we brought with us memories of the heroic abnegation which for two centuries has been the pride of our land (...) You can count with certainty on the entire sympathy of the ten thousand francophones of Worcester who will be happy to help you in the rugged task before you.³⁵

A beautiful bouquet of flowers was offered to Mother Filiatrault who thanked the donors and promised that she would increase the number of Sisters, for she had already observed that four would not suffice for the task.

The Superior General kept her promise and sent additional help which was particularly appreciated as Sisters Lapointe and Kègle arrived before the end of February. The

³⁴ Sr. Piché became the Superior General of the Grey Nuns from 1910-1920 and from 1930-1935. She was the first Superior General to visit the northern missions and she experienced all sorts of difficulties in her travels from 1912-1933, despite the improved conditions; therefore, one could conclude that the 'petite' Mother had a special vocation for hardships.

³⁵ Circ. mens. 1887-92, pp. 522-523.

first had been a foundress of the missions in the distant Mackenzie region, so Sister Piché and all her companions held her in high esteem, an esteem which would never decline as this great missionary had a marvelous ability to adapt. It was said that nothing was impossible to her. The people of Worcester would get a clear idea of this, even those who had at first displayed a certain reticence towards the Grey Nuns. She initiated the project of loaves which was practically the sole manner of assuring the daily subsistence. Despite this, it occasionally happened that tables were bare. St. Joseph was then called upon and small miracles happened. A baker once forgot to add salt to the dough, then offered his loaves to the orphanage; the contribution was gratefully received.³⁶ Sister Lapointe was not astonished at these little happenings and she continued her humble task of canvassing. Soon people became familiar with the silhouette of this Sister of Charity, always so pleasant and understanding. She was nicknamed "our daily bread" and everyone granted her requests.³⁷

In May, Mother Deschamps, the bursar came to Worcester to provide temporary relief. Sister Piché greeted the former Superior General with delight. She knew that her experience would be most helpful to her. The house was already inadequate to meet the requests for admission. The bursar suggested the purchase of land near the town where a small building would be erected. The citizens

³⁶ Sr. Rodier to the Sisters of the Mother House, Feb, 1900. The secretary was recalling the beginnings of the Community.

³⁷ Prematurely exhausted by hard work and extended fasts in the far North. Sr. Lapointe was recalled to the Mother House in 1895. The Worcester Journal published a laudatory article about the worthy religious. "We have seen her at work daily, rain or shine. If we have reason to be proud of our orphanage, we have contracted an enormous debt toward Sr. Lapointe who, by her untiring zeal and her indomitable energy succeeded in placing the Catholic Orphanage of Worcester in the forefront of charitable institutions of New England." (Circ. mens. 1892-95, pp. 743-744).

objected to this preferring a more durable project. In the meantime, the farm-house occupied by Sisters McKenzie and St. Georges, the guardians, was repaired.

The construction began in May 1892. At Sister Piché's request, Mother Deschamps turned the sod and the St. Anne Orphanage on Granite Street began to rise. Eleven Sisters were employed at this project which sheltered more than one hundred orphans while the others who visited the homes of the poor discovered dire poverty which they endeavored to relieve.

Exactly two years after their arrival in Worcester, the Grey Nuns entered the new orphanage where they were able to accommodate 140 orphans. The house was blessed on May 30 by Bishop Beaven of Springfield, who manifested great interest in this orphanage well situated outside of town and which had all the advantages of country living. Two years later, in November 1897 people were deploring the fact of it "being so far away and without a telephone", since a forest fire had started in the vicinity of the institution. Three employees had failed to control the destructive element. According to them only a squad of fire-fighters summoned by telephone could control the blaze. The zealous workers had not counted on the Sisters' trust in their special protector. Sisters Piché and St. Jérôme-Emilien went to the site of the fire and gave one of the spectators a small picture of Mother d'Youville to "set on one of the stakes." In less than fifteen minutes the fire was under control.

In the francophone parish of Notre-Dame the Grey Nuns pursued their charitable work to promote the faith and the French language. For many years to come they would teach in their own language, the orphans of the Canadian French who had come to the United States attracted by glowing promises.

Many young ladies from the Franco-American population eventually came to swell the ranks of the Grey Nuns.

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