

The History of the Little Franciscans of Mary

In part by William T. Clew – Revised by Joseph Massie in respect to the beginning History of St. Ann's French-Canadian Orphanage in Worcester.

The history of the Little Franciscans of Mary had its beginnings in 1889. It is here that the foundresses, those 11 courageous women with generous hearts, along with the support of local churches took on the task of caring and educating the orphaned, the loving care of the elderly and the compassionate care of the sick. This was the beginnings of two Worcester institutions, St. Ann's Orphanage of Worcester and soon to be St. Francis Home & Rehabilitation Center.

The establishment of the order was not easy. It was accomplished only after disagreements with a pastor in Worcester who first helped them get started, a bishop who first approved the forming of the order and then ordered them out of the diocese, the loss of the first two sisters around whom the order was born and a change in their mission from running an orphanage to caring for the elderly.

According to a history of the order, two teachers at St. Anne's Parish in the Manchaug section of Sutton sought permission from Father Alexis Delphos, pastor of St. Denis Parish in East Douglas, of which St. Anne's was a mission, to taking simple religious vows and wear the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis.

He granted that permission. They received the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis, took vows for one year and continued to teach. Father Delphos soon got together with Father Joseph Brouillet, pastor of Notre Dame des Canadiens Parish in Worcester, who wanted to build a school and orphanage in Worcester. Father Brouillet also wanted a religious order to teach and care for the orphans and elderly people in the growing Franco-American community in Worcester. Thus, began the Third Order of St. Francis.

He spoke to Mr. and Mrs. Remi Rondeau about recruiting their 18-year-old daughter Marie Louise. She became the order's first noviate, taking the name Sister Marie-Joseph.

Father Brouillet recruited and trained new members of the order over the next year, according to a history of the order. He was Father Superior of the order. He named his assistant at Notre Dame des Canadiens, Father Zotique Durocher, as their chaplain.

Father Brouillet started an orphanage in 1889 in a three-story building at Grand and Southgate streets. Within four weeks it had 20 orphans and two elderly women needing complete care, according to a history of the order. Eight novices had to care for them and clean, cook and provide clothes, furniture and keep the building in good repair. Every day, two of them went out into the community to beg for money, food, clothing and other supplies. It was their only source of income.

They received support from the Franco-American community, from many in the city's large Irish community and even from some in the Protestant community. They built a two-story annex in the fall of 1889 to house and teach the growing number of orphans, thus stretching their funds even thinner. (*This annex may be the one depicted in a photo showing 28 boys, 21 girls and 5 sisters in front of the "Orphans Home of St. Francis of Assisi".*)

The two women from Manchaug who had been the order's original sisters apparently were having problems. One, the Sister Superior, didn't show up for Mass one day. The other sisters went to her room and found she had left her habit on her bed and she was gone. The other apparently had conflicts with the new novices and the bishop would not allow her to renew her vows, according to the history of the order.

When it came time to pick a new Sister Superior, Father Brouillet's choice was turned down. Instead, the sisters picked Sister Marie-Joseph, now 19, the order's first novice. Father Brouillet then asked them to expand their ministry to an orphanage in Fall River and to an old farm in the Stoneville section of Auburn. There were only 14 novices to work at all three places and it proved too much. Two Sisters of Charity from Quebec eventually took over in Fall River. The Stoneville farm lacked water and the buildings were in disrepair, according to the order's history, and some of the orphans were getting sick.

Despite Father Brouillet's opposition, the sisters returned to Worcester. The sisters wanted to incorporate their order. Their chaplain, Father Durocher, suggested that they talk to Bishop Patrick T. O'Reilly, Bishop of Springfield, without informing Father Brouillet. Bishop O'Reilly had allowed Father Delphos in Manchaug to give the two school teachers their habits but when the sisters met with him he said he didn't know who they were. He said he had authorized the two women in Manchaug to wear the habit, but had not authorized the founding of a new religious community in the diocese. He suggested that they join an existing order. He also said they had a right to be incorporated by the state.

Their disagreements with Father Brouillet continued, but eventually a solution was worked out. They were invited to Baie St. Paul in Quebec by Father Ambrose-Martial Fafard, the pastor to care for mental patients in a parish there. Father Fafard became their Father Superior, helped them form their Mother House there and helped the sisters finish their novitiate and take their vows. They were officially the Little Franciscans of Mary. Because their Mother House was in Canada, the bishop accepted them into the Springfield Diocese as missionaries, with the provision that they care for the elderly instead of orphans, who were placed in the charge of the Grey Nuns.

In Worcester, the order had moved its orphanage from Southgate and Grand streets to Bleeker Street. When the change to caring for the elderly came, they moved to Thorne Street. (*Note: The St. Francis Home & Rehab Center is now located between Thorne, Plantation and Bleeker Streets.*) When it opened it housed 90 elderly borders,

according to a history of the order. The St. Francis Aid Society was formed to help support the home, which was named the St. Francis Home.

It has grown over the years and its address now is 101 Plantation St. Its name is now the St. Francis Rehabilitation and Nursing Center. It has 137 beds, two secure dementia units, a rehabilitation gymnasium and an adult health center. There also is a chapel where Mass is celebrated for residents and participants, according to the center.

The Little Franciscans of Mary continued to operate the home until 2000, when Sister Jacqueline Alix, pfm, administrator, retired. The sisters moved out of the home in 2006. Since 2009 it has been owned and operated by an affiliate of Landmark Solutions.

Despite their disagreements with Father Brouillet, the original sisters in the order had good things to say about him. Mother Marie Anne de Jesus, Superior when she resigned in 1908, wrote;

“Even though Father Brouillet makes us suffer so much, we must admit we owe him a great deal. Without him where would we be? Let us remember that because of him we have acquired much merit. Since he has been God’s instrument in entrusting this beautiful community to our care, let us cause him no grief or harm. Let us pray for him and abandon everything else to God.”