

History of the Sisters of Providence

The arrival of Mother Theodore Guerin and her companions at their destination in the United States answered many questions about their life in their new home country.

The conditions were primitive, humbling, perhaps even shocking to them. On October 22, 1840, after a rough journey through swollen river waters and muddy trails, the sisters stepped from their stagecoach into a dense forest; no village, not even a house in sight. The church to which they were led had an altar made of two planks driven into the ground with a plank placed across them.

From that humble origin, a vibrant Roman Catholic Congregation of women religious was given life that is sustained today through Mother Theodore's foresight, legacy and energy that continues to motivate the generations of sisters who have followed in her footsteps.

The French sisters immediately began to study English. They worked to clear a parcel of land for vegetable gardens. With assistance from the bishop of Vincennes, they negotiated with the local family that gave them their first living accommodations to purchase a small cabin for their motherhouse and use the structure they were building to establish an academy for girls.

The first student at the academy arrived for enrollment July 4, 1841. The academy is now known as Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, the oldest Roman Catholic college for women in the United States. The sisters' reputation as outstanding educators grew, and more requests came for their assistance in founding and staffing other schools. Sisters would eventually staff schools across Indiana. They also would extend their ministry into Illinois, Massachusetts, California, Florida, Texas, Oklahoma and other states. The Sisters of Providence were the first women's congregation from the United States to establish a mission in China and they formerly had missions in Peru and Antigua. Currently, missions are in Taiwan and China.

Mother Theodore's inspiration continues today with the current generation of Sisters of Providence. Ministries today focus on maintaining educational presence in classrooms and extending their teaching skills into other areas. They also minister in child care, adult literacy, health

care, spiritual direction; address issues such as anti-racism, poverty and violence as they work for justice in various venues; and foster a way of living that recognizes sustainability and the interdependence of all creation.

The motherhouse at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods has been a home, an inspiration, a meeting place, a center for personal formation, a welcoming place and a catalyst for positive change for more than 170 years, and the commitment to further God's loving plans by devotion to works of love, mercy and justice in service among God's people is just as prominent now as it was when Mother Theodore was planting gardens, chopping wood, building schools, educating women and easing discomfort for others.

10 Things to know about Saint Mother Theodore Guerin

- Mother Theodore was born Anne-Therese Guerin Oct. 2, 1798, in Etables-sur-Mer, France.
- Mother Theodore's feast day is Oct. 3, so proclaimed by Pope John Paul II in 1998.
- Saint Mother Theodore Guerin's father was a sailor in Napoleon's navy.
- There was no bridge across the Wabash River from Terre Haute to the West Terre Haute area when Mother Theodore arrived. It took a full day of travel to cover about four miles by stagecoach after crossing the river on a ferry.
- Mother Theodore came to the United States from France. She mastered English well enough to write many letters in her new language and to carry on negotiations with American businessmen. English was her third language. Breton was first and French second.
- Amid turmoil and hardships facing the Congregation, Mother Theodore journeyed to France to visit the Sisters of Providence there, and to seek money for the mission to Indiana. While there, she had an audience with Queen Marie-Amelie who became a generous benefactor.
- With the skills that she learned and developed, today Mother Theodore would be recognized as a pharmacist. She often helped care for the ill in their homes.
- Requests for prayer through the intercession of Mother Theodore come from all 50 United States and many foreign nations. Visitors also have come from all 50 states and about the same number of other countries.
- Mother Theodore's remains have rested in five places at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods: in the Congregation's original cemetery, in the crypt below the Church of the Immaculate Conception, in the Congregation's current cemetery, in a tomb beneath the floor of the church, and now at in interim shrine near the sanctuary in the Church of the Immaculate Conception.
- It was custom to receive a new name when one entered religious life at that time, and the name "Theodore" is Greek for "gift of God."

10 things to know about the Congregation:

- There have been more than 5,200 women who have entered the Sisters of Providence since 1840.
- The Sisters of Providence welcome people of all faiths to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods where visitors can walk or bike around the grounds, visit chapels and shrines, or join the sisters for daily Eucharistic Liturgy.
- Sisters of Providence value their extensive educational backgrounds, which they use to educate others.
- The French Rule of the Sisters of Providence of Ruillé in 1835 mentioned visiting prison inmates. Today, the Sisters of Providence continue this ministry by visiting prisons and offering educational and spiritual support, including Death Row inmates at a federal prison near their motherhouse.
- There are 10 women in the formation process to become Sisters of Providence. Women of varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds are welcome to join the Congregation.
- The Sisters of Providence were the first American women religious on mainland China after the Boxer Rebellion (1920).
- At the request of Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton, Sisters of Providence took charge of “domestic arrangements” at the Civil War hospital in Indianapolis in 1861 shortly after the attack on Fort Sumter. Sisters also served as nurses.
- The white cross symbol that is worn by each Sister of Providence is a unique design used only by the Congregation. Sisters are often recognized by the cross wherever they travel.
- The Sisters of Providence employ more than 200 staff members in administrative departments, motherhouse operations and health-care services for sisters who are ill or retired.
- The Sisters of Providence are honored in a memorial called “The Nuns of the Battlefield” in Washington, D.C. The monument stands on the corner of Rhode Island Avenue and M. Street.

A woman for all time: biography

Mother Theodore came to the United States from France in 1840 to establish a Congregation of women religious in a dense forest adjacent to a remote community known as Saint Mary-of-the-Woods near Terre Haute. Primitive conditions greeted her and her five companions after a tumultuous journey of more than three months.

A humble beginning was nothing new for Mother Theodore, who was born Anne-Thérèse Guerin, Oct. 2, 1798, in the village of Etables in Brittany, France. She lived with her mother, father and three siblings in a cottage not far from the Atlantic Ocean. Her two brothers died at a young age. Her father, who had served in Napoleon's Navy was murdered by a robber. Her mother never fully recovered from the tragedy of her father's death. Only her sister outlived her.

At a young age, Anne-Thérèse had a fondness for the ocean and beaches. She nurtured her love of God through prayer while enjoying nature's beauty. At age 20, she asked her mother's permission to join a religious order. Her mother refused. Five years later, her mother agreed to let her daughter follow her heart. She entered the Sisters of Providence of Ruillé, France, Aug. 18, 1823. She professed first vows Sept. 8, 1825, and perpetual vows Sept. 5, 1831. She was given the name of Sister St. Theodore.

Sister St. Theodore spent several years as a teacher in France, where she received distinguished honors for her work and for her administrative abilities. She also ministered to the sick.

Across her beloved ocean, pioneer life was changing rapidly in central regions of the United States. Population was growing, and, along with it, the need for spiritual and educational guidance. The Most Reverend Simon Bruté, bishop of the Diocese of Vincennes in the 1830s, had a desire for sisters to minister in the diocese. He dispatched a colleague to France to find a congregation that would be willing to assist.

The superior of the Sisters of Providence of Ruillé believed only one of the Congregation's sisters could lead the mission. Her choice was Sister St. Theodore. Sister St. Theodore was reluctant to accept the challenge, mostly because of health problems. After intense prayer and discernment, and words of encouragement, she agreed, and began the arduous journey that

eventually led her to Indiana.

In her new homeland, she and her companion sisters started right way on their mission and opened an academy for girls less than nine months after their arrival in Indiana. Soon thereafter, under Mother Theodore's leadership, 10 schools were founded throughout Indiana and one in Illinois before expansion into other areas such as Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles.

Mother Theodore suffered from illness most of her life. She was treated for a disease at an early age, and the treatment is believed to have damaged her digestive system. She lived on broth and soft foods for many years. Eventually, her condition overtook her, and she died May 14, 1856.

For her heroic life and because she was a model of devotion to God, Mother Theodore was canonized as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church Oct. 15, 2006, in a ceremony presided over by Pope Benedict XVI at The Vatican.

Pope Benedict described Mother Theodore as "a beautiful spiritual figure and a model of Christian life and strength who had infinite confidence in Divine Providence."

At the time of her beatification Pope John Paul II pronounced the life of Mother Theodore Guerin as "a perfect blend of humanness and holiness" when he introduced her to the world during a ceremony in 1998. He also described her as "a model of the best of womanhood."

People who knew her did not forget her. Each had a story to tell about her kindness, her love, her goodness and her devotion. She was an inspiration for others in many ways.

Mother Theodore's presence is still strong throughout the Congregation. Her remains rest at an interim shrine adjacent to the sanctuary in the Church of the Immaculate Conception on the motherhouse grounds.

People throughout the world contact the Congregation for information about its foundress, or to ask for special favors through Mother Theodore's intercession. A Celtic cross in Mother Theodore's memory stands prominently in the Congregation's cemetery bearing the inscription that reads "I sleep, but my heart watches over this house which I have built."

A woman for all time: Mother Theodore Guerin faces challenges that many people still face today

She ... and five companion sisters were homeless when they arrived in a dense Indiana forest on a dark October evening in 1840. They lived with a generous local family until a new building was completed.

She ... experienced tragedies in her early life. Her two brothers died in fires and her father was murdered by a bandit while he was on his way home.

She ... handled challenging family issues. Her mother could not cope with her father's death.

She ... learned survival skills. She and her companion sisters planted and cared for gardens to supplement their food supply. They helped care for livestock. Their cabin was so cold that their bread froze. Still they endured.

She ... developed a keen sense of financial knowledge, including how to raise money and manage it to its fullest benefit. She depended on the generosity of her neighbors, and she worked to secure long-term resources that supported the young Congregation.

She ... became a businesswoman. Within a year of arriving in Indiana, she established the Academy, now known as Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. She handled negotiations for construction and materials. She often met with area business leaders and newspaper staffs.

She ... suffered from major health problems. Treatment for a disease early in her life caused severe damage to her digestive system. She survived on broth and soft foods only for many years before her death.

She ... experienced prejudice. Many people weren't accepting of Catholics in the 1840s, especially Catholic women who tried to do business in a "man's world."

She ... knew how to turn to prayer to cope with the many challenges that confronted her. She placed complete trust in God for survival, and asked for God's support in establishing schools throughout Indiana, and leading the young Congregation.

Mission statement

The mission of the Congregation of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods is to honor Divine Providence and to further God's loving plans by devoting itself to works of love, mercy and justice in service among God's people.

Who are the Sisters of Providence?

The Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods are a Roman Catholic Congregation of women who minister in 20 states, the District of Columbia, Taiwan and China. Currently, there are about 350 members.

Known initially for their extensive contribution to quality education, the Sisters of Providence are courageous women of faith committed to effecting positive change and creating hope for the future. The Congregation is known to act boldly on its convictions through diverse ministries, including service to the poor, education, health and social services, and ecological-justice, often stretching or breaking expected boundaries. They are committed to living peacefully and in right relationship with God, one another and Earth. They are innovative visionaries and resourceful risk-takers, and they live prayerfully among God's people.

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