

The Church in Canada.

Under this heading will be collected and preserved all obtainable data bearing upon the history and growth of the Church in Canada. Contributions are invited from those having in their possession any material that might properly come for publication in this department

REV. MOTHER DELPHINE

FOUNDRRESS AND FIRST SUPERIORESS OF THE ORDER OF THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH IN TORONTO.

The subject of this short memoir, Mary Antoinette Fontbonne, in religion Sister Mary Delphine, was born in France and belonged to a good family in the department of Haute Loire. Trained from her youth in a pious manner, she soon learned to despise the vanities of this world, and at the early age of seventeen years was received into the religious community of the Sisters of St. Joseph, at Lyons, to which order two of her great-grand-aunts, two grand-aunts, and two aunts had belonged. During the French Revolution this community, along with many others, was suppressed. One of her aunts (Mother St. John), together with some other religious, were thrown into prison and condemned to be guillotined for refusing to take the oath prescribed by Robespierre and his party, but a day or two before the execution of the sentence, whilst preparing themselves to appear before God, word came that Robespierre had met with the just reward of his crimes, and their prison doors were thrown open. But the heavenly mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph was not yet fulfilled and much good remained for them to do. No sooner had Napoleon I. placed religion in France on its former footing, than the venerable Mother St. John (aunt of Mother Delphine) was invited to recommence the work which before had been so nobly carried on, and establish once more the pious order. The invitation was accepted and a flourishing community of five thousand religious, which sprang up in a comparatively short space of time, clearly showed that God had blessed the work. It was in this community, sanctified by persecution, that Sister Delphine received the first lessons in a religious life; and here, under the tuition of a saintly and venerable aunt, she learned to make those sacrifices to religion and charity for which she was afterwards so remarkable. In the year 1835, the Right Rev. Doctor Rosati, Bishop of St. Louis, visited France for the purpose of obtaining some religious aid in the administration of the spiritual wants of his immense diocese. The heart-stirring eloquence with which he depicted the spiritual famine which cast a veil of sorrow over the wilds of America, made a deep impression on the young sister Delphine, who, with the consent of her superioress, determined to consecrate herself to the foreign missions. In this noble resolution she was joined by her sister, four other religious of the same order and her brother, Rev. Mr. Fontbonne, then a priest in the diocese of Lyons. There are few who can appreciate the greatness of the sacrifice here made. Surrounded by persons who loved her on account of her many excellent qualities, and in the midst of whom the first years of her religious life had been spent so happily, it must indeed have been a great trial for her to tear herself away from them, in order to go to a country, the language of which was unknown to her, and where she had no comfort, no earthly happiness to hope for. Her venerable aunt, whom the weight of ninety years was sinking into the grave, besought her that she would not go until she had received her last sigh and closed her eyes in the sleep of death; but the call of charity was greater than that of nature.

Yielding to her young niece, who consented to remain should she desire it, she said: "Go then, my dear child; I dare not keep you, if Heaven has ordained otherwise. Go, and may the Holy Spirit of God direct you in all your undertakings!" It was on the feast of All Saints, 1st November, that these heroic souls left their native land. Before going they went to the Church of *Fourviere* to invoke the blessing of God upon their undertaking, and place themselves under the powerful protection of the Blessed Virgin. They there assisted at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass offered up by Rev. Mr. Fontbonne. In order to avoid the pain of bidding adieu to the community, they had left the convent early in the morning; but love and affection had kept watch long before that, for in the midst of the Mass they were disturbed by sobs behind them, and looking around they beheld the venerable

aunt and mother bathed in tears and almost heartbroken at the thought of parting with those so dear to her. She had come to take a last long farewell of her beloved nieces and nephew, for she knew that she would never again behold them. They immediately went to Havre, from which place they set sail, and after a voyage of six weeks they arrived in New Orleans. After a short rest they started for St. Louis, where they were most kindly welcomed by the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, who were already established in that city. Here commenced those trials of privation which would have discouraged any other but one whose object was the sole glory of God. Shortly after they arrived in St. Louis, Bishop Rosati sent them to Carondolet, a poor village about five miles distant from that city, and appointed Mother Delphine Superioress. Arrived here all their earthly goods consisted of a few cups and saucers, and a loaf of bread and a ham, upon which they supported themselves for a week, and after that were obliged to beg for a sustenance. They thus got what was sufficient for their support for another week, after which time the Rev. Mr. Fontbonne was obliged to sell some of his most costly Church ornaments in order to prevent them from starving. The hut in which they lived did not even afford them protection against the inclemency of the weather; and often during the night they were obliged to hold an umbrella over their heads so as to shelter themselves from the rain which came pouring in torrents through the dilapidated roof. That was not all—privation was not their only cross. They had also to bear up against the ill will of many, even of those who should have been the most zealous of any in their cause. Disheartened by so many and such long trials, M. Delphine's sister and another member of the Order returned to France despairing of being able, destitute of means as they then were, to do good in America. Upon their return they told their tale of sorrow to Mother St. John, who immediately wrote to Mother Delphine, entreating her to return to the Mother house; and sent her money sufficient to defray the expenses of the voyage. But the Spirit of God invoked by that saintly aunt here came to her aid, and she determined to bear patiently with her situation, hoping, though almost against hope, that God would in the end bless her undertaking. And she did not hope in vain. where that log hut once stood there is now established one of the most flourishing religious institutions in Missouri. Having placed the house at Carondolet on a secure basis and seeing that her services might be more useful in some other place, she asked leave to resign her charge of Superioress. Her request was granted and she was removed to St. Louis, where she was placed at the head of a half-orphan asylum. Shortly afterwards she was ordered to Philadelphia, and appointed superioress of the Novitiate which had just been established there. In 1851, Mgr. de Charbonell, Bishop of Toronto passed through that city; he had long felt the want of a religious community in his Episcopal city, the members of which, at the same time that they gave a sound religious instruction to the female portion of the children, would also perform those many works of mercy which the growing population of the city required, and he asked the Rev. Mr. Fontbonne, brother to Mother Delphine, and director of the community, to use his influence in enabling him to establish a branch of the order in Toronto. The project succeeded according to our Rev. Bishop's expectation. In the month of October of the same year, Mother Delphine founded the order of the Sisters of St. Joseph in this city, assisted by three other sisters, namely; Sister M. Martha, Sister M. Alphonsus, Sister M. Bernard. No sooner had they arrived in their new home than they commenced their heavenly mission of charity. Schools were set on foot in different parts of the city and they took charge of the Orphan Asylum on Nelson St. (now Jarvis St.) where 23 orphans were placed in their charge, and in which a novitiate was opened. They were soon joined by many pious young persons, who had long desired an opportunity of consecrating themselves to God, so that in the short space of a few months they were enabled to send some of their number to Hamilton, and not long afterwards another branch institute was founded at Amherstburg. The community in 1856 numbered between professed and novices forty-eight members, and after having established it on a firm foundation in Toronto and Hamilton, and inspired the Sisters with the true religious spirit, it pleased God to crown Mother Delphine's life by the glorious death of a martyr of charity.

(To be continued).

M. M. B.