

Who are the Religious Hospitallers of Saint-Joseph?

The Order of the Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph's is a nursing order founded in 1635 by a married man, Jerome LeRoyer de La Dauversiere, in La Flech, France. LeRoyer was a devout Christian, working for the municipality of La Fleche. On February 2, 1630, the feast of the Purification of Mary, having consecrated himself, his wife and their three children to Mary, he felt a deep calling from God to found a religious order of nursing sisters to care for the sick. While in the process of repairing the local dilapidated hospital, he met Marie de la Ferre, who at that time was devoting her life to visiting the poor and the sick. De la Ferre had also felt called by God to devote her life to the care of the sick in the hospital. Together they founded the order of the Hospitallers of St. Joseph.

In 1634, God beckoned again, influencing LeRoyer to assist settlers on the island of Montreal in the New World, to build a hospital to care for settlers and natives, and to send sisters of his order to care for them. All of this sounded so difficult a task for a family man with five children and many other responsibilities. However, with the help and generosity of friends and acquaintances, he asked Paul De Chomedey de Maisonneuve, a 29 year old soldier, to be in charge of the project and governor of Montreal. He also met Jeanne Mance, a French nurse who wanted also to dedicate herself to the care of the natives in New France. Jerome LeRoyer was a man of great faith and this enabled him to accomplish what seemed impossible. God had said to him: "My grace (help and light) will never fail you."

A company was formed which would purchase the island of Montreal from fur-traders who were trading with the natives, supply ships were rented and willing settlers were hired for the expedition. The first three sisters crossed the ocean in 1659, with Jeanne Mance, who had built the first rudimentary hospital. This was the beginning of the Order in Canada. LeRoyer died that year, financially ruined and in very poor health, without knowing if his project would succeed.

For the first 200 years, the sisters weathered the storms of Montreal and after having suffered through three fires, they built the Hotel-Dieu of Montreal, which is one of the largest hospitals in Montreal. Other Hotel-Dieu hospitals were built by the sisters in Kingston, Ontario, New Brunswick and Quebec.

In addition to the care of the sick, the sisters became involved in the education of children. They opened orphanages, private schools and taught in public schools. The most significant New Brunswick project of the sisters was the hospital for lepers in Tracadie, built in 1868, at the request of the diocese of Chatham Bishop James Rogers. Three sisters came from the Hotel-Dieu in Montreal, to start this mission and take care of lepers from everywhere, who were literally dumped on the shores of Tracadie for the next 100 years. Today, a cemetery with the names of the victims of this terrible plague is a witness to the love and dedication of the sisters in Tracadie. Other hospitals were built in Bathurst, Campbellton, Edmonston, Miramichi, Perth-Andover, Tracadie, Caraquet and in Ontario, Maine, Wisconsin, Vermont and Illinois. Along with hospitals, nursing schools were also developed. The Sisters were also attracted to the care of

the frail and elderly and did so in nursing homes in New Brunswick, Ontario, the United States and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.

Le Royer, the founder of the order, had asked his sisters to be women of faith, dedicated to the care of the sick, especially the neediest, and they have endeavored to carry out their work for almost 400 years in the spirit of charity.

As today's society changes and as government services are streamlined or reduced, the examples and generous spirit of Jerome remains needed and every present.

We are all part of that proud tradition of service of meeting peoples unmet needs and make a difference in the lives of so many.