

Centennial of the Death of Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, 1902-2002

Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart led the Sisters of Providence to the American west in 1856, and for 45 years served the people of the region: sharing their pioneer hardships, building the first hospitals and schools, bringing hope and comfort through her trust in Providence.

As the nineteenth century--and with it the frontier era--drew to a close, Mother Joseph's legendary strength finally began to fail. Death came on January 19, 1902, at Providence Academy, Vancouver, Washington, after a short but painful struggle with cancer.

The sisters carefully recorded the events of Mother Joseph's last days, her words, her suffering and her abiding faith. Now as we commemorate the centennial of her death, we are able to share in the experience of these days through the chronicles of Providence Academy, correspondence, and other documents in the archives.

A Diagnosis of Cancer

When Mother Joseph returned from her sixth and final trip to Montreal in the spring of 1899, the chronicles noted: "Our dear Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, with her 76 years, returns to us rejuvenated and in good health. She said that these months spent in the house of our mothers was the happiest time of her life."

A month later, however, Mother Joseph was admitted for surgery at St. Vincent Hospital in Portland. She explained in a letter to her cousin, the Bishop of Pembroke, Ontario:

For some time glands appeared under my arm which my superiors thought prudent to have removed. The operation was very successful and healed well. But I am again experiencing pain, which makes me believe that the malady did not entirely disappear.... In other respects my health is good [but] I should not count on time, my Lord; at my age, the night is not far distant.

Although the terminology of the time is vague, the symptoms described here and in later documents are consistent with a diagnosis of breast cancer.

Despite persistent pain and swelling in her arm, Mother Joseph continued to travel and work much as usual. Within the year, however, she began to experience new and frightening symptoms, indications that the cancer had spread. On December 23, 1900, she wrote to Mother Mary Antoinette, Superior General, in Montreal:

You see, Mother, that I can scarcely write. I must tell you that my right eye is totally blind, inflamed and painful. My left eye does not trouble me but the sight is growing dim. Since September I feel a shooting pain in the right side of my face.... The doctor believes the cause comes from the operation on my breast. But the best oculists of Portland, who are most attentive to me, say there is no apparent need of an operation on the eye. They do everything to preserve the good eye.

In a steady correspondence with her friends and spiritual advisors, Mother Joseph spoke openly of her pain and growing weakness, and of her preparations for death. Still, it was

only in the last months of 1901, when she was confined to bed, that the dismal prognosis of her illness became clear to all.

The End Draws Near

"January 1902: Mother Joseph Dangerously Ill." So begin the chronicle entries written by Sister Mary Olive, Provincial Secretary, which give a full account of Mother Joseph's last days:

The year opens in an atmosphere of sorrow. Our venerable Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, confined to the infirmary for many months, each day approaches closer to the tomb which already opens to receive her. Our hearts bleed at the thought. It seems to us impossible to be separated here below from our foundress, our Mother who has so zealously labored for nearly a half century in the work of our mission. But, in order to reach Heaven ... one must leave the world; hence, let us not be selfish with regard to the one whom, so it seems to us, deserves a well-earned rest in Paradise....

Her universal suffering caused by the cancer centered in her eye is almost intolerable. She cries at times, she sighs. Prayer is never far from her dying lips, and this strengthens her courage. She loves to have at her side some little orphans to join her in saying the rosary and the Way of the Cross, and to sing hymns for her. To encourage the dear children in this office of charity, she gives them little sweets.... At times, a veil of sadness envelops her features, but her submission to the Will of God and her great trust in his Divine Providence drives away the dark shadows.

On the first morning of the year, Mother Joseph said, "My dear children, I see the first day of the year, but I will not see the last; I am in the arms of God...."

The Comfort of Friends

As news of her illness spread, Mother Joseph received consoling letters and sympathetic visitors from near and far. Her spiritual director, Father Aloysius Ragaru, SJ, encouraged her to embrace the will of God by reciting the Prayer of St. Ignatius: "Take, Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding...." Sister Blandine of the Holy Angels, who had accompanied Mother Joseph to the west in 1856, wrote from Montreal: "I would like to be like a little bird to visit you every day.... I would give you a nice doughnut with a glass of good Canadian wine!"

The arrival from Eastern Washington of Sister Joseph of Arimathea, with whom she had founded Sacred Heart Hospital, Spokane, and her own niece, Sister Adrien, brought particular joy to Mother Joseph. She said to her niece: "If you had waited even a little while to come, it would have been too late."

Sister Mary Olive recalled her own touching encounter with the patient:

She took my hand and said to me, "My little Olive, it is finished...." And I to her responded, "You are content to die, no?" "Yes, my sister, yes, to see the face of my Jesus, that of my Mother Immaculate, and that of my good father,

St. Joseph." She thanked me with all her heart for the little services which I had always been so happy to do for her; then she said to me, "I am going to ask our good Lord that he will give you health and that you will live for a long time and do much good for our community."

Other visitors included J.B. Blanchet, her faithful servant and fellow architect, who had been away from Vancouver for several months. Although in a semi-conscious state, Mother Joseph recognized him as he appeared at the door: "Come in, come in, our good friend Blanchet." When her physician, Dr. DeWitt Connell, of Portland, called to see her, she thanked him for his kindness and said, "Doctor, I shall pray for you when I see Almighty God in Heaven."

Last Words to the Sisters

On January 8 or 9 (accounts vary), Bishop Edward J. O'Dea interrupted his pastoral visit of the diocese and returned to Vancouver specifically to administer the Last Rites to Mother Joseph. The sisters were grateful for this expression of love and respect from the bishop, who had long been Mother Joseph's friend and protege.

The chronicles again describe the scene and record Mother Joseph's last testament to her sisters: "Peace and happiness reflected in her face, so drawn and broken by suffering.... After communion, having made her profession of faith with all the ardor of which her heart was capable and renewing her vows in a strong voice, she asked pardon of the Community in these words:

My sisters, I ask pardon for the grief I may have caused you. I forgive you also with all my heart for the sorrow you could have caused me involuntarily. I recommend myself to your prayers. I am happy to die in the bosom of the Community. I love my Community and I have always loved it.

I ask you to tell my Major Superiors that I am happy to die as a member of the Community and to have been one of its subjects; I do not regret having spent all my strength for her; also that I have always been happy to spend myself for the works of the Institute and this to the best of my ability.

"After a pause, she continued with emotion:

My Mothers and my Sisters, permit me to recommend to you the care of the poor both in our institutions and outside them; have no fear to assist the poor and to receive them--you will not have any regrets. Do not say: ah! this does not concern me, let others attend to them. My Sisters, whatever concerns the poor is always our affair.

"The voice of our dear patient was quiet for a few moments, but collecting her strength, she added:

I believe it is my duty to share with you what His Excellency Bishop O'Dea told me on the subject of the community. Yes, my dear Sisters, the bishop said that he is edified by the good spirit which lives within all the sisters of his diocese and the understanding which reigns between the clergy and the community. Let us thank the good Lord with all our heart and ask Him to continue to bless us with this grace.

"The bishop then anointed her with the Holy Oils. This entire ceremony was very touching and greatly impressed his Excellency, who told us that this was the first time he had administered the last sacraments to a sister."

A Little Feast

Mother Mary Theresa and some other sisters from St. Vincent Hospital, Portland, arrived on Thursday morning, January 16. They gathered at Mother Joseph's bedside in her room next to the chapel. In the chronicles, Sister Mary Olive records the touching scene that followed:

After her prayer of thanksgiving, Mother Joseph said to us: "Let us have a little feast." There were a few oranges that she had prepared and some candy. "Come, come," she said, speaking barely above a whisper, and ringing her little bell to summon the others. "Sing something for me before we begin."

We began to sing "Feast in the Cenacle," although we were all in tears. She passed the sweets around, and then said, "Sing again." This time, we sang "Oh Providence most gentle," and then the Magnificat, "Beau Ciel," and "Laisse-moi quitter cette terre" ["Let me leave this earth"]. "Oh, how beautiful," she exclaimed!

During this tender scene, something even more touching occurred. Before removing the Christmas crib from the chapel, Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament brought the wax figure of the Infant Jesus into Mother Joseph's room. Mother took the Infant in her trembling hands, spoke silently to Him, embraced and kissed Him over and over, and then gave it back with a long look of farewell. While she held her dear Lord in her arms--this little Infant Jesus which she herself had made--we sang Bishop Bourget's favorite hymn, "How sweet, our Jesus, our most Tender Spouse."

The Communion she took before this little feast was her last.

A Quiet Death

Two days later, Mother Joseph slipped into unconsciousness, and the sisters began a vigil at her bedside. She died quietly on Sunday afternoon, January 19, immediately after Benediction, which was hastily finished so that the sisters and their chaplain could witness her last breath. In a letter announcing her death, Mother Benedict Joseph, Provincial Superior, described Mother Joseph's final moments and praised her legacy to the community:

She experienced no agony, no fear, no death rattle, she died slowly, inch by inch. She rendered her soul to God while our good Father Verwilghen elevated his hand in a last absolution and pronounced these sublime words: 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! I commend my soul into your hands.' At this moment the blessed soul of our dear Mother Joseph had already taken flight to the eternal regions.... She died at 3:50 p.m. on the Sunday Feast of the Holy

Name of Jesus. No doubt, her Jesus granted to her the great grace to die on His feast, as a reward for her burning zeal to make Him known and to spread His reign in these far away regions....

What a great figure, what an extraordinary woman the Community is losing! The works and the virtues of Mother Joseph remain imperishable as does the memory we keep of her. The churches, the tabernacles where our Eucharistic Lord is loved and adored, the hospitals, the schools, the orphanages, etc., etc., where good works are multiplied from year to year, all of these are fruits of the labor and the extraordinary talents of this true Daughter of Charity, servant of the poor.

The somber tolling of the Academy bells alerted the people of Vancouver that their good Mother Joseph was gone.

The Funeral Services

The first service, a solemn Mass of Requiem, was offered on Wednesday morning, January 22, in the beautiful academy chapel built by Mother Joseph. The sisters' chaplain, Father Felix Verwilghen, was attended at the altar by old friends of the community, including Bishop O'Dea and Father Emil Kauten, who had helped in the founding of Providence Hospital in Seattle. The chapel was filled with sisters, friends, students from the Academy, and some Sisters of the Holy Names from Portland. After Mass, the casket was removed to the sisters' community room to lie in state until the public funeral.

At 9:45 a.m. Thursday, a solemn procession formed outside the academy doors, with the young orphan boys leading the way to St. James Cathedral in Vancouver. They were followed by the older boys and the Christian Brothers from St. James College, the girls from Providence orphanage and academy, about eighty sisters representing five different religious communities, and many friends in carriages and walking. The casket was received at the Cathedral door by Bishop O'Dea. Mother Joseph's friends--many from Portland where she was widely known and respected--filled the church.

After Mass, the Most Reverend Alexander Christi, Archbishop of Portland, delivered a touching funeral oration. He related the principal incidents of her life and spoke of her charity. According to one account, "his words found echo in all hearts, for none who knew her could deny her great qualities of mind and heart."

From the cathedral, the procession continued to the Catholic cemetery, St. James Acres, where Mother Joseph was buried "near the little chapel called 'Calvary' at the foot of the first station of the cross." The unusually elaborate casket, covered in a black drape, was the gift of a benefactor, Mr. Dunning and his sons, undertakers in Portland, who also conducted the funeral cortege. The casket carried a plaque on which was engraved in English, "Mother Joseph - aged 79 years - Rest in Peace." The plain white headstone matches those of the other sisters, and says simply: "Mother Joseph S.H. Parizeau 1823-1902 R.I.P."

Sister Mary Olive's chronicle entries end with this farewell: "Good Mother Joseph, your memory will remain always fresh in my heart and in those of all our sisters, I am sure. Rest in peace in the Sacred Heart and pray that we will all join you in our eternal home."
