

Pioneer, Leader, Woman of Faith



Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart was a distinctive figure of early Northwest history, a woman of extraordinary compassion and vision. Blessed with a keen mind and a complex personality, she strove for perfection in all things while embracing the challenges of an all-too-imperfect world.

When Mother Joseph arrived in the Washington Territory in 1856, she encountered a strange, new world of physical hardships, cultural and religious diversity, and rapid change. There were no hospitals, few schools, and little in the way of charitable services for those suffering the misfortunes of life on the frontier.

Equipped with simple tools, enormous gifts for creating and building, and deep faith in Divine Providence, Mother Joseph and her sister companions stepped into the breach to fill these unmet needs. Under her leadership, more than 30 hospitals, schools and homes were opened for orphans, the elderly, and the sick in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and southern British Columbia.

Young Talent

Mother Joseph's family life provided the foundation of skills and dedication she needed to survive and even to thrive in difficult circumstances. She was born on April 16, 1823, the third of twelve children born to Joseph and Françoise Pariseau on their farm in St. Elzear, Quebec, Canada. The dark-haired, gray-eyed girl was baptized Esther, and like her Biblical namesake showed an early flair for leadership and a protective nature. The daily requirements of a rural lifestyle demanded that she excel at household tasks such as sewing, weaving, and carding wool. Yet her talents were far more diverse.

Esther served as a second mother to her younger brothers and sisters, a role she relished. She also became a capable craftsman. Her father was a respected coachmaker, and young Esther spent much time with him in his shop, learning the carpentry and design skills that she later applied to constructing some of the Northwest's first hospitals and schools.

At 17, Esther was enrolled by her mother in a newly-opened boarding school at St. Martin de Laval. Françoise Pariseau was determined that her daughter's intellect, talents, and skills be broadened and enriched beyond what the family's home education could provide.

In 1843, as Esther Pariseau turned 20 years of age, a new religious community of Catholic women known as the Sisters of Providence was founded in Montreal. The young community was led by Emilie Gamelin, who had devoted her life to easing the needs of the city's poorest residents. Esther first became aware of the Providence community during family visits with Monsignor Ignace Bourget, Catholic Bishop of Montreal. She began to think about life as a woman religious.

New Beginnings

Within a few months, Esther decided to enter the Sisters of Providence. On December 26, 1843, Joseph Pariseau presented his daughter to Emilie Gamelin. He said, "I bring you my daughter Esther, who wishes to dedicate herself to the religious life... She can read and write and figure accurately. She can cook and sew and spin and do all manner of housework well. She has learned carpentry from me and can handle tools as well as I can. Moreover, she can plan and supervise the work of others, and I assure you, Madame, she will some day make a very good superior."

The talented young woman standing before Mother Gamelin would go on to become Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, founder of the Sisters of Providence missions in the West. But first she would learn to adapt to a new life away from her beloved family. As a novice, she was trained in nursing in the sisters' pharmacy and infirmary. Her sewing skills were honed in the roberie, making habits and vestments, and she learned to carve fine wax figures. She also assisted the treasurer with the daily tasks of marketing, baking, and the laundry. On July 21, 1845, Esther made her vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service to the poor, and received her name in religion, Sister Joseph.

Following two years as director of the elderly women boarders, Sister Joseph took charge of the community's financial accounts. During the deadly typhus and cholera epidemics that struck Montreal in the late 1840s, she added to her duties care of the afflicted sisters. As Mother Gamelin herself lay dying of cholera in 1851, Sister Joseph was the nurse at her bedside, caring for her in her last moments. Sister Joseph proved herself a valuable asset to the community in these difficult years, and in 1852, she was named as assistant to the community's new superior, Mother Caron.

Pioneer Sisters Venture West

In 1856, Sister Joseph would call upon all of her gifts and skills, and her deep faith, as she led a group of four Sisters of Providence from Montreal to the Washington Territory. Their mandate and their desire was to care for the poor and the sick, to educate the children, and to bring the light of Christ into the lives of all they met. Bishop Bourget dedicated the new mission to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and bestowed a new name on its young superior; from this time on she was known as Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart.

On December 8, after a month of arduous travel, the sisters stepped off a steamer onto the banks of the Columbia River at Fort Vancouver. Their arrival was eagerly anticipated, yet no preparations had been made to house them. A one-room attic in the bishop's home became the first "convent" for the sisters in this pioneer country.

Mother Joseph and her companions faced daunting challenges, including primitive living conditions, treacherous travel, and scarce financial resources. Even conversing with their new neighbors was difficult. The French-speaking Mother Joseph had to rely on the translation abilities of the two bilingual sisters in her group until she learned enough English to communicate.

But the pioneer sisters quickly demonstrated their tenacity and determination, as well as their adaptability. Taking their cue from the interests of the people of Vancouver, the sisters opened a boarding school, later known as Providence Academy.

“Schools are needed first of all,” Mother Joseph reported to the sisters in Montreal. “Americans do not count the cost where education is concerned [and] their generosity will help us to maintain our establishments for the poor.”

She responded also to the citizens’ request for a hospital, converting a small building that she had planned to use as a laundry and bakery. In exchange, the women of the town promised to support the care of poor patients, and on June 7, 1858, the sisters opened St. Joseph Hospital, the first permanent hospital in the Northwest.

A year later, Mother Joseph championed the incorporation of these charitable works, understanding that civic recognition would enhance the stability of the institutions while protecting the sisters’ rights under the law. This was not the last time she would be called upon to balance the distinct needs of American culture with the values and traditions of her religious community.

The Mission Grows

The following years found Mother Joseph besieged with requests from clergy and civic leaders to bring the works of the Sisters of Providence to towns throughout the West. Resources—both human and financial—were always in short supply, and Mother Joseph spent long days and many sleepless nights determining which communities offered the greatest opportunity for service and the best chance of success.

She and her companions took lengthy, dangerous trips by horseback and river boat to the mines in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and the Caribou Country in British Columbia, begging for the precious gold dust and nuggets essential to the support of their works of charity. And as more sisters came from Montreal or entered the community in Vancouver, Mother Joseph saw her small “Providence of the West” gradually grow to encompass the region.

Schools in Steilacoom and Walla Walla in 1863 and 1864, respectively, were followed closely by a mission for the native people in St. Ignatius, Montana. Mother Joseph rejoiced to see the sisters’ work with Native Americans take root, regretting only that she was not able to share in this ministry. She had little opportunity even to visit the sisters at this small isolated mission in the mountains of western Montana. Fortunately, they had their own strong leader in Sister Mary of the Infant Jesus, who served in St. Ignatius for more than 50 years.

Larger than Life

After ten years of service as superior of the western missions, Mother Joseph was named treasurer, with responsibility for construction of all the sisters’ buildings in the region. In this ministry over the next 25 years, she traveled thousands of miles by horseback, steamer, stagecoach, and rail to establish additional schools and hospitals and beg for the funds to support them.

Popular stories about Mother Joseph on the construction sites abound, painting a vivid image of this spirited and gifted woman. One can well imagine her bouncing on wooden beams to test their strength, climbing up to inspect a roof, or working late into the night to rebuild a poorly made chimney. She was a knowledgeable and demanding supervisor, expecting perfection from both herself and those with whom she worked. Building design, property selection, negotiating with civic and church leaders, overseeing the laborers—Mother Joseph managed them all. Her finest building, Providence Academy in Vancouver, built in 1873, still stands as a testament to her aesthetic vision and workmanship.

Mother Joseph’s intelligence, political savvy, and compassion could only have been matched by her abiding faith. Despite her active nature, she was remembered by her contemporaries as a deeply spiritual woman.

She was devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and worked throughout her life to spread this devotion and reliance on Divine Providence. The heart of each of her buildings was a beautiful chapel, the altar carved, gilded, and adorned with her loving touch.

A Life Fulfilled

In 1899, her 55th year of religious life, Mother Joseph's legendary strength began to fail. She chafed at the "inconveniences" of old age, and resolved to continue her work while praying for the patience to accept whatever suffering would come her way. In July, she was treated for breast cancer at St. Vincent Hospital in Portland. The operation eased her pain for a while, and she was able to travel again, to visit and assist the sisters in Seattle, Spokane, Cranbrook, and New Westminster. "I have our dear West so much at heart. You know that I love it..." she wrote in 1900. It was only when the tumor spread to her brain that she retired to her room next to the chapel at her beloved Providence Academy.

Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart died on January 19, 1902, at the age of 79. The chronicles record her last words to the sisters gathered around her bed: "My dear sisters, allow me to recommend to you the care of the poor in our houses, as well as those without. Take good care of them; have no fear of them; assist them and receive them. Then, you will have no regrets. Do not say: ah! this does not concern me, let others see to them. My sisters, whatever concerns the poor is always our affair."

A Mother's Love

Mother Joseph was many things to different people: intense, resourceful, prayerful, strong willed, artistic, demanding. But to the orphan children who came under her care she was an unfailingly tender and protective mother. Throughout her life, these "abandoned little ones" claimed her first and best affection.

The first orphans arrived at the Mother House in Montreal on the same day Mother Joseph entered the novitiate. Within a few weeks of their arrival in Vancouver, the sisters welcomed three-year old Emilie Lake into their home, then the infant James Wilks, and then a steady stream of orphans. In the following years, Mother Joseph built and furnished several houses for these abandoned children. Of the first, she wrote: "The bishop has furnished the lumber. As for the rest, Providence will provide."

Mother Joseph purchased a farm at the banks of the Columbia River to provide fresh produce for the children and as a place for the boys to work and learn useful skills.

Her most extensive begging tours were conducted on behalf of the orphans, in the bleak years the river flooded the farm and during construction of Providence Academy. But mostly, she just loved being with the children, praying with them, sharing pancake suppers and little treats, teaching the ways of family and church and work.

And at the end of her life, her final journey was to purchase the land and plan the building of an orphanage in New Westminster, British Columbia. Having completed the arrangements, she wrote to Mother Mary Antoinette in Montreal: "I will be the godmother. I ask you, Mother, to grant the favor of this beautiful name, Providence Orphanage. It is probably the last child I will have the honor of holding over the baptismal font..."

Honored Memory

Mother Joseph's contributions to education, health care, and the social services continue to be recognized a century after her death. In 1980, she was named as Washington State's second representative in National Statuary Hall, in Washington, D.C. And in 1999, at the request of a group of Vancouver sixth-grade students, the legislature passed a bill declaring her birthday, April 16, as Mother Joseph Day in Washington State.

The corporation Mother Joseph established in 1859 is acknowledged as a "Pioneer Corporation in Washington State," and the vibrant health care network she created remains largely in place today. Under the sponsorship of the Sisters of Providence in the western states—now known as Mother Joseph Province—

Providence Health and Services, serving Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska and Montana, continues the caring traditions established by the intrepid pioneer sister and her colleagues 150 years ago. Mother Joseph's life has provided a wellspring of inspiration for those carrying out the mission of the Sisters of Providence, yesterday and today.

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