

# PEOPLE OF COURAGE



# PEOPLE OF HOPE

*The Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario has invited Dr. Mark McGowan to write a series of articles on people who impacted the development of Catholic education in Ontario. The stories convey the influence that seemingly ordinary people can have on government and society because of their belief and faith that what they are doing is the right thing to do. Each issue of Principal Connections will feature a profile of courageous people who have gone before us to lay the foundations for Catholic education. We hope that you will share these stories with your school communities so that all may have a better understanding of the sacrifices, the hope and the faith that went into developing and nurturing our Catholic school system.*



**Sister Bernard Dinan, CSJ**

Photo courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto Archives

## PATIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE

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**O**n October 7, 1851, four women arrived in Toronto at the request of the new bishop, Armand de Charbonnel: Delphine (Maire-Antoinette Fontbonne) [superior], Alphonsus (Sarah Margerum), Mary Martha (Marie Bunning) and Bernard (Ellen Dinan). Entrusted with the establishment of an orphanage, these members of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph (CSJ) were the Canadian vanguard of a religious order originally founded in France in 1650, suppressed during the French Revolution, resurrected in 1807 and recently called to North America, first to St. Louis, in 1836 and later to Philadelphia. In a very short period, however, this foursome would put in place the foundations of what would become the largest order of women religious in Ontario. The legacy of the Sisters of St. Joseph would be felt profoundly in Ontario's health care system, social services and the publicly-funded Catholic schools.

By 1856 Sister Bernard Dinan, the youngest of the pioneers was the only remaining member of the original foundation left in Toronto. Sisters Delphine and Alphonsus had died and Sister Mary Martha was busy establishing the CSJs and their work in Hamilton and its

newly created diocese. Sister Bernard was born Ellen Dinan in 1829, daughter of Thomas Dinan and Ann Sullivan, at Macroom, County Cork, Ireland. Her family migrated to the United States either prior to or during the Great Irish Famine and in 1849 she entered the congregation in her adopted city of Philadelphia. In March 1852, Ellen made her final profession of vows in St. Michael's Cathedral, and was immediately appointed the head of novices, a position that she held for four years. Part of this time was spent in Sandwich (now Windsor) where she founded a CSJ-sponsored institution that served as hospice, house for the poor and a Catholic school. The multi-talented Sister Bernard appeared to be capable enough to manage all three operations. By 1858 she was appointed as superior of a similar operation in Niagara, which was then part of the Diocese of Toronto. It was on the Niagara peninsula where Sister Bernard served a variety of administrative roles, including superior of the CSJs in St. Catharines.

In 1869 Sister Bernard became superior-general of the entire congregation, which was now operating schools, health care facilities and social services in the dioceses of Toronto, London

and Hamilton. Under her leadership Toronto's House of Providence received a new wing (1873), and new schools were built under the provisions of the Scott Act. Private boarding schools for "respectable young girls" were opened, most notably Notre Dame Academy in Toronto. At the request of Toronto bishop, later Archbishop John Joseph Lynch, she began a school for women who had been interned in the provincial "Lunatic Asylum," on Queen Street. In addition, she oversaw the erection of a new academy in St. Catharines, the CSJ take-over of the St. Nicholas Home for Working Boys, the building of the Notre Dame des Anges boarding house for working women (forerunner of St. Michael's Hospital) and the enlargement of the CSJ motherhouse near Clover Hill, in Toronto.

As the network of CSJ-managed schools expanded, Sister Bernard was also responsible for the allocation of teachers to each facility from among the new recruits to the congregation. Even while in administration, however, Sister Bernard never let go of her love of teaching and could often be found among the young women of CSJ schools on field trips or taking personal interest in the quality of education and the residential conditions of the schools in her care. She was modeling what had always been a fact within the congregation: regardless of the task you had been given, particularly teaching, there was the expectation that you would serve the poor and sick wherever they were found. By 1873 Sister Bernard's little band of four had grown into a religious order of 131 sisters in Toronto alone (the London and Hamilton jurisdictions had become independent of Toronto in 1868 and 1856 respectively), managing a network of schools and services that stretched from Oshawa to Windsor and from Barrie to Niagara Falls.

Sister Bernard's life took a sharp and unwelcomed turn in 1874 when

Archbishop Lynch removed her as superior-general because of an incident between a resident student and an un-named sister at St. Joseph's Academy. The student became a cause célèbre in the public press as a victim of "papal tyranny." Although the adolescent testified in an affidavit that she had born false witness against the Academy, Lynch had Sister Bernard reassigned to Oshawa, in an effort to distance the congregation and archdiocese from the alleged scandal and to begin leadership anew.

Sister Bernard, a model of patience and grace, continued the grassroots work in education and social service that had made her a much-loved leader in the congregation. By 1882 she had moved to a St. Catharines convent school again and five years later was teaching in Thorold. Her work was cut short within the year when she was recalled to Toronto to manage the expansion of the Sacred Heart Orphanage at Sunnyside, an institution, which combined the housing of homeless children and provision for a Catholic curriculum for the residents within an extraordinary home-like pedagogical setting. By 1891, the new bishop, John Walsh, opened a centre for 300 youth, which included dormitories, playrooms, classrooms, workshops, refectory and chapel.

Sister Bernard celebrated her golden jubilee as a sister at Sunnyside in 1900 and died in her sleep there, one year later on September 20, 1901. In fifty years, she had witnessed her congregation become the undisputed leader in Catholic education with elementary schools and academies in the dioceses of Toronto, London, Hamilton, Peterborough, Pembroke and Sault Ste Marie, which included North Bay and the current city of Thunder Bay. Her patient leadership provided wise oversight to the building of a Catholic school system of which twenty-first century Ontario Catholics are fortunate beneficiaries.



## House of Providence

Just south of St. Paul's Basilica, which is located at the corner of Queen Street East and Power Street, are two 2007 Heritage Toronto plaques that tell us about a house of charity, Providence House. They state:

*Once one of the city's largest centres of charity, the House of Providence stood nearby for over 100 years. It was initiated by Toronto's Roman Catholic Bishop, Armand-François-Marie de Charbonnel, in response to the plight of the desperately poor, including many Irish immigrants. To provide shelter and food for those most in need, de Charbonnel enlisted both the help of the Sisters of St. Joseph and the generosity of the surrounding community. Operated by the Sisters, the House of Providence opened in 1857. Nearly always filled to capacity, the House of Providence would eventually quadruple in size to provide for about 700 residents, including the elderly, the unemployed, orphans, widows and newcomers to Canada. Some stayed only a few days; others, for years. At its doors, daily meals were given out to the hungry, particularly during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The House of Providence was demolished in 1962 to make way for the Richmond Street exit from the Don Valley Parkway. It was by then a home for the aged, and its residents moved with the sisters of St. Joseph to Providence Villa and Hospital, a new facility located at St. Clair and Warden Avenues, and known today as Providence Healthcare.*

[http://torontoplaques.com/Pages\\_GHI/House\\_of\\_Providence.html](http://torontoplaques.com/Pages_GHI/House_of_Providence.html)

