

We have to go back to mid-17th Century France to the town of LePuy. A number of widows and young women were anxious to try to alleviate the suffering caused by civil and religious strife. A travelling Jesuit missionary, Father Jean Pierre Medaille SJ, became associated with them. This tiny nucleus of women began to live very simply in small groups, sometimes only three, and with no distinguishing mark to set them apart. They began to offer what spiritual or material service they could. By 1650; these women were recognized as a Congregation: the Sisters of St. Joseph in Lyon. It grew and flourished, spreading to many parts of France for more than a 100 years until the time of the French Revolution. In this “reign of terror”, many Sisters were imprisoned or scattered to their family homes. Five Sisters of St. Joseph were guillotined in Le Puy.

The revolution ended in 1794 and in 1807, Mother St. Jeanne Fontbonne, who had been cheated of a martyr’s death by the fall of Robespierre, was asked to gather women religious who had been scattered during the revolution and to refound the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Thirty years later, the Congregation spread to North America arriving in St. Louis Missouri in 1836. Philadelphia was next and from here four Sisters, travelling in lay clothes, reached Toronto in 1851 to begin the Canadian foundations.

Within 40 years, the Congregation had established other independent branches in Hamilton, London and Peterborough where Sisters began orphanages, schools and hospitals.

In 1881, four Sisters travelled by steamboat from Toronto to Prince Arthur’s Landing (present day City of Thunder Bay) at the head of Lake Superior and began our ministry in Northern Ontario.

Soon, houses were opened in Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury and North Bay. Sisters began the first separate schools in the province and opened hospitals where no one had gone before. They cared for orphans and the aged and also brought with them the gift of music, which they taught instrumentally and in choirs.

In 1920, the autonomous Congregation of Pembroke was founded from the Peterborough Congregation. Finally, in 1936, with much pain, the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie began its own Congregation, again drawing from the members of the Peterborough Congregation. Carrying on the tradition of all Sisters of St. Joseph, this youngest group, with its Motherhouse in North Bay, began to reach out to the small communities around Lake Superior and on Manitoulin Island.

Where once we struggled to fund ministries from our own resources, government funding has enabled others to participate in areas pioneered by religious. Ironically, these same government grants have been a major cause of our turning to other ways of serving God’s people.

Today, although our numbers are smaller than in the 1950’s and early 60’s, our ministries have greatly diversified.