

Sister Delphine (Marie-Antoinette) Fontbonne, CSJ (1813–1856)

Sister Delphine (Marie-Antoinette) Fontbonne was the first superior and founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the United States and Canada. Born December 24, 1813 in Bas-en-Basset, France, Marie-Antoinette was educated by the Sisters of St. Joseph and then entered the Lyon Community in 1832, taking the religious name Sister Delphine. In 1836, Sister Delphine and five other members of her community were sent to the United States in response to a request from the St. Louis bishop for missionaries. That year Sister Delphine was appointed superior of a log cabin convent in Carondelet (St. Louis), the congregation's first Motherhouse in the United States. Several years of service in that area followed. In 1850 she was appointed superior of a novitiate and orphanage in Philadelphia.



A visit of the Toronto Bishop Armand-François-Marie de Charbonnel to Philadelphia in 1851 prompted efforts to bring the Sisters of St. Joseph to Toronto. De Charbonnel's father had helped re-establish the order under the guidance of Mother St. John Fontbonne following the upheavals of the French revolution. When Bishop Charbonnel learned of the presence in Philadelphia of a member of the Fontbonne family, he immediately asked that she be released to look after an orphanage in his diocese. In accordance with his wish, Mother Delphine and three other sisters arrived in Toronto on 7 October 1851 and immediately took care of the orphaned children and the sick poor in the city.

As early as 1852, Mother Delphine sent Sister Martha von Bunning to found an orphanage in Hamilton, and the Sisters began teaching in the separate schools of Toronto. In 1854 the sisters built a new Motherhouse near St. Paul's Church. Shortly afterwards, at the request of Bishop de Charbonnel, Mother Delphine began planning the work for the House of Providence (est 1857).

At the close of 1855, Toronto was struck by another typhus epidemic and the congregation would lose two members before Mother Delphine herself contracted the disease and died on February 7, 1856. At the age of 42, she left a community of 38 members to mourn her. Mother Delphine, by her desire to help the poor and develop the minds and hearts of the neglected, had left a splendid example of love of God and love of neighbour.

LINK: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/fontbonne_marie_antoinette_8E.html