

The Congregation of Notre Dame in Early Nova Scotia

by

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Quaecumque sunt vera – whatsoever things are true – this is the motto of St. Francis Xavier University, a university with a tradition of a hundred years of service in the cause of Christian education. Host in this centenary year to the Canadian Catholic Historical Society, “Saint F. X.,” as it is known to its own Nova Scotia, offers with its hospitality all that its Pauline motto and its long tradition implies. *Quaecumque sunt vera* becomes quite easily the watchword of the historian, who seeks in the past an interpretation of the present; it is a torch for the educator, who sees life in its ultimate values; it is the invitation held out to every Christian to seek happiness in the high places. In its context, it is above all an interpretation and a synthesis of our historic Catholic past:

All that rings true, all that commands reverence, and all that makes for right; all that is pure, all that is lovely, all that is gracious in the telling; virtue and merit wherever virtue and merit are found – let this be the argument of your thoughts. The lessons I taught you, the traditions I handed on to you, all you have heard and seen of my way of living – let this be your rule of conduct. Then the God of peace will be with you. (Phil. I, 4:8.9, Knox translation.)

Generous failure, peace in the midst of conflict, these indeed summarize the early years of the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame in Nova Scotia. The earliest reference to their presence in French Acadia occurs in a document written by that impetuous man of God, Monseigneur de SaintVallier.¹ Armed with his new authority as Vicar General of New France and successor to the ailing Bishop Laval, he set out in May, 1685, for that vast diocese which stretched from Louisbourg² to Louisiana. By the feast of St. Anne he was in Port Royal (now Annapolis), whither, he writes, he had sent a good Sister of the Congregation ahead of him. Much had already been accomplished by this Sister in instructing the young women and girls of Port Royal, states the future Bishop of Quebec.³ The presence of a member of the Congregation of Notre Dame in Port Royal is not borne out by any other document which has so far come to light. The Sister remains anonymous, the reference unique. The probabilities for

¹ *Etat présent de l’Eglise et de la colonie française dans la Nouvelle-France*, par M. l’Evêque de Québec, Paris, 1688.

² Then called “Havre à l’Anglais.”

³ Saint-Vallier, *Etat présent de l’Eglise...*, p.

and against are almost evenly divided.

In 1685, the year of Saint-Vallier's first visit to New France, Mother Bourgeoys was still governing the community she had founded at Ville-Marie. In 1684, the Mother House there had burnt to the ground. With two livres and a blessing, the Foundress had immediately set about erecting a new house. In the interval, the Sisters returned to the stable where the work had begun in 1658 and carried on their teaching wherever and whenever they could. The one thing Marguerite Bourgeoys had promised for her penniless and homeless community was to do still more for God.⁴ She had just lost two of her most valued workers in the fire. One of these she had destined to succeed her as Superior; the other was her niece.⁵ But she had no time for grief. She had the burden of government and the deep consciousness of her duty to souls. God had swept away in a single night her props and her plans. In any interpretation of sanctity one is never far from paradox – that paradox whose soundness is attested by the very Gospel of Christ. Sometimes, as in this present instance, common sense meets paradox in a fraternal gesture. At no time was Mother Bourgeoys more likely to send her workers, now without their convent in Ville-Marie, to the far-flung limits of the vast diocese which was French Canada. The Sisters were accustomed at this epoch to go about from parish to parish as itinerant catechists, preparing children for First Communion and Confirmation. At no period, however, was documentation held so cheap as at this time of reorganization after apparent chaos. Numbers and names mattered little to these pioneer women; records were difficult to keep. Souls were the great concern, and all energies were directed towards reaching them. We must therefore be wary of concluding that, because no other document supports the Bishop's statement, the possibility of a Congregation Sister's presence at Port Royal must be ruled out entirely. Both events and the divine foolishness of sanctity point towards probability.

The question also arises as to the reliability of Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier as a chronicler. His previous experience as Court Chaplain to Louis XIV had hardly prepared him for his post as Vicar General and Bishop-elect of New France. Objectivity, moreover, does not seem to have been his outstanding characteristic. A letter from the Procurator of the Séminaire des Missions Étrangères in Paris to Bishop Laval, dated 1684, throws much light on Saint-Vallier's character and goes far to explain his later unpopularity. The letter develops the reasons for and against his becoming a missionary bishop, and I have resumed them briefly and in translation. The young Chaplain has been highly thought of at Court; he has withdrawn to Saint-Sulpice to avoid having a bishopric forced upon him by his relatives and friends; he has youth, family prestige, and a reputation for fervour and austerity. But, the writer continues with admirable restraint, he is a little too zealous – "d'un zèle un peu trop ardent" – for his perfectionment and that of others. The investigation goes on: Saint-Vallier's

⁴ *Histoire de la Congrégation Notre-Dame* (9 vols), Montréal, 1910-1952, II, p. 336.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, p. 201-202.

spiritual director agrees that the young Abbé lacks experience, but insists that he is gaining in moderation. Father Tronson, the Superior of SaintSulpice, has also been consulted on the fitness of this candidate for the post of Bishop of Quebec. "He would do well enough in France," is his noncommittal answer. Then the Abbé's orthodoxy is examined because of his connection with some followers of the "new doctrine" (obviously, Jansenism). But he is declared free from doctrinal taint. Finally, the candidate himself has been sounded on his policy and his inclinations. Saint-Vallier would accept a bishopric in the New World; he would govern with the aid of an experienced council.⁶ This last was a promise which he forgot quickly and completely. He left for New France, made a lightning trip through the diocese, and was in France again by January 1, 1687, glowing with information and projects for reform. His brief stay in Quebec had had something of the effect of a rushing torrent, which one is content to admire from afar. Already he had begun to build that reputation for zeal, impetuosity and integrity of life which is borne out by the documents of the period.⁷ To the end of his life he found advice unsavory and delay intolerable.

These personal traits of the Bishop have direct bearing on the first attempts of the Congregation of Notre Dame to establish a house in early Nova Scotia. From his arrival in 1688, Saint-Vallier unceasingly urged the little Ville-Marie community to new foundations farther and farther into the French colony in the wilderness. A convent in Port Royal was one of his dearest projects.⁸ But his demands on the human material expendable in the Congregation were so numerous that every last Sister was taxed to the utmost of her strength. It was impossible to meet adequately even the needs of the districts of Montreal and Quebec. So the eighteenth century caught up with the Bishop's unfulfilled desire. In 1702, he set aside an annuity of 175 livres to finance the new mission.⁹ But war came to the colony too soon, and with it the loss of Port Royal as a French possession. The new French fortress of Louisbourg, at the gateway of New France, now drove Saint-Vallier to renewed efforts to bring the Sisters to Acadia. The Recollet Fathers from the Breton and the Paris provinces were in charge of the garrison town and the surrounding region. Constant disputes between the two groups, rumours of intemperance,¹⁰ these were doubtless the reason that Saint-Vallier himself now hesitated to send the Sisters to the great French stronghold. The reason that he seems to have given was that the

⁶ Douglas Brymner, ed., *Report on Canadian Archives*, Ottawa, 1887, pp. xxii-xxiv.

⁷ *Ibid.*, "Lettre de M. Tremblay aux Directeurs du Séminaire de Québec," pp. xxxii ff.

⁸ *Hist. de la Cong.*, III, p. 348.

⁹ *MS.*, Archives of Congrégation de Notre-Dame, Montréal, A 18, XIII, "Contrat de Rente," Paris, 1708.

¹⁰ Hugolin Lemay, *Les Récollets de la Province de Saint-Denis et ceux de la Province de Bretagne à l'île Royale*, de 1713-1731, Ottawa, Société royale du Canada, 1930, *passim*.

Congregation rule, by its very nature, demanded that the community be directed by diocesan priests.¹¹ By 1727, however, he could brook no more delays. Perhaps some premonition of his approaching death led him to move with more zeal than discretion. He insisted on an immediate foundation. Now, while the Congregation of Notre Dame had accepted the mission of Louisbourg implicitly, the Council at Montreal could not give the Bishop Sisters for the new house at once. Without further scruple, he took matters into his own hands.

It will surprise no one that not all the Sisters of the Congregation, even in those days of primitive fervour, were confirmed in grace. In the convent at Ville-Marie there was one Sister Leroy (Sœur de la Conception). She was fifty-five, intelligent, quick-witted, a successful teacher, and had a touch of that rashness which drew her towards the spectacular and the dramatic. Though still in excellent health, she had been recalled from the missions to the Mother House. It is not dear what her position was. In that time of pressing need for missionaries, this alone would raise a question. Perhaps she was the last of those self-styled visionaries who brought to Canada the wave of illuminism which swept Europe in the seventeenth century. The communities of Ville-Marie had known a tragic exponent of this false supernaturalism some twenty-five years earlier in Sister Marie Tardy. The annals are charitably silent on the reasons for Sister Leroy's apparent inactivity. Nor is it possible to judge of its wisdom at a distance of more than two hundred years. In some way, Sœur de la Conception conveyed to the Bishop her willingness, perhaps her eagerness, to go to Louisbourg to found a convent. This impulsiveness was a trait Saint-Vallier could understand and appreciate. So in May, 1727, she left for the town of Louisbourg with the Bishop's blessing, but without the sanction of the Council at Montreal. The community refused to endorse the appointment then or later.¹² They must have feared consequences of which the Bishop knew nothing, for they would hardly have risked his displeasure for the mere purpose of enforcing discipline. Doubtless they considered Sister Leroy's act a breach of that obedience she had promised in presence of the Foundress and of His Lordship in 1698. In that year, when Sœur de la Conception was twenty-six years old, the Congregation received its rule and its members pronounced for the first time officially the simple vows of religion.¹³

That she set out alone with two young girls for that far-off outpost caused no comment, for the Congregation was not yet able to send two Sisters on every assignment. On her arrival she purchased a house-at far too high a price—¹⁴ and by December of that year twenty-two boarders were at school in the new convent. She could not draw the King's pension of 1,500 livres a year, for it was restricted by a condition: there must be three Sisters at Louisbourg. She appealed

¹¹ *Hist. de la Cong.*, III, p. 352.

¹² *Hist. de la Cong.*, IV, pp. 201-205; III, p. 348, pp. 353-355.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 127-130.

¹⁴ *MS., C. N. D. Archives*, "Contrat de vente."

to Ville-Marie for help, but was told to return to Montreal, Bishop Saint-Vallier's death in 1727 brought about a solution. When in 1733 Monseigneur Dosquet asked her to return to the Mother House, she left Louisbourg for good. She died at Ville-Marie in 1749, at the age of seventy-seven, in the habit and at the convent of the Congregation.¹⁵ There is little doubt that her own rashness and the Bishop's impetuosity had betrayed her into a situation to which there seemed no solution. How far the episcopal authority then extended in these matters, and to what point Sister Leroy was justified in placing herself under the Bishop's direct jurisdiction are matters for the theologian.

The Council at Montreal accepted both the debt incurred and the house she had purchased, though the first was a severe drain on the community finances and the second unsuitable for a school.¹⁶ The ex-Superior General, Sister Saint-Joseph (Trottier), was sent to direct the establishment.¹⁷ By 1734 there were six Sisters at Louisbourg. For to the original three had been added Sisters Saint-Placide, Sainte-Gertrude and a postulant named Catherine Paré who was professed at Louisbourg some two and a half years later with the religious name of Sister Saint-Louis-des-Anges. The Bishop of Quebec had given the Congregation permission to receive novices at Ile Royale because of the great difficulties of travel to and from Ville-Marie.¹⁸ This would seem to be the first religious profession on Cape Breton.

The foundation had lost nothing in prestige during the years of Sister Leroy's doubtful tenure, for in 1740 the local Governor, de Forant, founded a bursary in perpetuity to pay the fees of eight boarders at the Congregation convent.¹⁹ These were to be the daughters of officers of the garrison. In the case of vacancies, the remainder was to revert to the upkeep of the Sisters. The bequest finally worked out to a pension of 1,600 livres a year,²⁰ which, added to an annuity of 1,500 livres from the French Court,²¹ constituted the basic income of the convent. The Court pension was not paid after 1743,²² and the Sisters were at times very poor indeed. Like the great fortress itself, the Louisbourg establishment was doomed to failure. In 1745, after a harrowing siege of many weeks, Sisters and pupils were herded on board a ship for France. Louisbourg

¹⁵ *Hist. de la Cong.*, IV, p. 205.

¹⁶ *MS*, C. N. D. Archives, "Document du 30 août 1734."

¹⁷ *MS*, C. N. D. Archives, "Extrait des Registres des nominations de la Communauté des Sœurs de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame à Montréal." This document lists the names of "mes Sœurs St. Joseph, St. Arsenne et St. Benoist."

¹⁸ *Hist. de la Cong.*, IV, p. 33.

¹⁹ *MS*, C. N. D. Archives, "Extrait des Registres du Conseil d'Etat... Le Testament de feu Isaac Louis de forans 22 août 1742."

²⁰ *MS*, C. N. D. Archives, "Constitution du Clergé 9 mai 1742."

²¹ *Hist. de la Cong.*, IV, p. 31.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 142, 145.

had already claimed one victim. Sister Saint-Joseph, broken by age and illness, had set out for Ville-Marie in September 1744. She died on board ship opposite l'Île d'Orléans and was buried in Quebec.²³ The siege now claimed another missionary. The little group of exiles reached France on August 24 (1745), and journeyed to La Rochelle, where they took refuge in an orphanage, l'Hôpital Saint-Etienne. By September 17 Sister Saint-Placide was dead.²⁴

A correspondence relative to unpaid pensions and the needs of the Sisters in exile covers the period from 1745 to the death of the last of the Louisbourg missionary teachers in 1766.²⁵ The Court did not grant the Congregation Sisters the customary refugee gratuity. L'Abbé de l'Isle-Dieu, in a letter dated February 7, 1750, speaks of the arrears of the pension due to them, and their expenses during four years and nine months of exile.²⁶ The letter throws some light on living conditions as well as monetary values. Their expense account for the entire stay in France totalled 3,275 livres. For wood to be used as fuel, they paid 312 livres; laundry and candles came to 180 livres; clothing and bed-covering consumed 1,006 livres; doctor's fees and medicine took 150 livres. Their journey from the port at Rochefort to La Rochelle cost them 120 livres. Four people lived four years and nine months on 5,045 livres.²⁷

Marginal annotations on these letters are almost as interesting as the text, for they were to serve as a guide to the reply. One note opposite the expense list reads: "They would have avoided the greater part of this expenditure had they been willing to go back to Canada, and not insisted on remaining in France until the peace was signed."²⁸ Another note states angrily that the Sisters "had no right to the Court pension during their stay in France, since it was destined to help their establishment in Louisbourg." On their return, the note continues, they will receive what they used to receive before the siege – a dubious settlement indeed.

Their reluctance to return is explained by the fact that there was never any

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161-162.

²⁵ Some of these letters are in the C. N. D. Archives, others in Quebec, in the Seminary Library. Wherever possible, I have referred to the original. In some cases, however, I have quoted from a transcription in *Histoire de la Congrégation*, already cited elsewhere. There is also an old letterbook in the Provincial Archives at Halifax which gives résumés of some of the Quebec letters and transcriptions of some parts of them. The most informative are from l'Abbé de l'Isle-Dieu to the community at Montreal or to the Court. Pierre de La Rue, l'Abbé de l'Isle-Dieu was then Vicar General of Canada, but resident in Paris.

²⁶ Letter from l'Abbé de l'Isle-Dieu to the Court, February 7, 1750. (Quebec Seminary Collection.)

²⁷ Letter from Sister Saint-Arsine, Superior of the Louisbourg exiles, dated September 18, 1749. These expenses are also enumerated in the letters of l'Abbé de l'Isle-Dieu. (Quebec Seminary Collection.)

²⁸ *Ibid.*

question in the minds of the French officials of sending them back to Ville-Marie. They must return to the garrison town from which they had left. When they finally reached Louisbourg in 1749, they found their house in ruins. They rented a dwelling at about 600 livres a year, at their own expense, but it was so small that they could receive no boarders. They could not even conduct classes in sufficient numbers to teach all the young girls of the town.²⁹ Sister Sainte-Gertrude was stricken with paralysis shortly after her return from France, and had to be sent back to the Mother House.³⁰ Sister Sainte-Thècle and Sister Saint-Vincent-de-Paul came to increase the staff, but Sister Saint-Louis-des-Anges returned to Ville-Marie because of the restrictions of space.³¹ The Congregation began to rebuild the old convent on borrowed money for which the community accepted responsibility. During an October night in 1753, a windstorm carried off the building materials and part of the unfinished house.³² The Sisters lived mainly on promises from the Court, promises that were never fulfilled. By 1757 they were so poor and so deeply in debt that they asked to be allowed to return to Ville-Marie. Governor Drucourt and Commander Prévost pleaded with them to remain, and renewed their appeals to the King's Minister.³³ But the enemy was already at the gate. By July the capitulation had been signed, and the Louisbourg community was once again on its way to France. The Superior, Sister Saint-Arsène, was beginning her second exile. Two teaching Sisters and two lay Sisters accompanied her.³⁴ Sister Sainte-Thècle was already ill from privation and the horrors of siege. When they had been ten days on board, she died and was buried at sea.³⁵ She was thirty-eight years old.³⁶

The survivors once again took up life in the orphanage at La Rochelle. They received a Court pension of 250 livres,³⁷ and the annuity from Governor de Forant's estate was paid regularly.³⁸ But they were never again to see Canada. For six years Sister Saint-Arsène and Sister Saint-Vincent taught the young exiles from Louisbourg.³⁹ In 1764, the Sisters offered their services to the French government for Bel Isle, on the island of Miquelon. If, on the other hand, France had no need of them, they would return to Canada.⁴⁰ Before either of the

²⁹ *Hist. de la Cong.*, IV, p. 155.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152

³¹ MS., "Annals," C. N. D. Archives.

³² *Hist. de la Cong.*, IV, p. 267.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 368-369.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 370-371.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 371-372.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

³⁷ *Hist. de la Cong.*, IV, pp. 346; 358.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, V, p. 114

³⁹ *Ibid.*, IV, p. 374

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, p. 374; V, p. 90.

alternatives could be explored, Sister Saint-Arsène died and was buried at La Rochelle.⁴¹ The two lay Sisters, or “données” – they are called by either name – seem not to have been regular members of the Congregation. Only one of them, Sister Geneviève Henri, was with Sister Saint-Vincent after the death of their Superior. She remained with her until Sister Saint-Vincent, too, died in 1766.⁴² The Abbé de l’Isle-Dien, Vicar General for New France and the Sisters’ friend and protector, then arranged for Sister Geneviève to enter a religious house in France.⁴³

From 1733 to 1758 eight Sisters of the Congregation and two “données” or lay Sisters were missionaries in Louisbourg. Of these, three returned to the Mother House because of illness, two died at sea, and five others died in France and were buried there.

The ruins of the house at Louisbourg have been partly uncovered by the excavations undertaken there previous to World War II. It was located in the centre of the town, quite close to the Hospital.⁴⁴ It seems to have been some 170 feet long, and could accommodate thirty boarders and a much larger number of day pupils. The teaching staff varied between four and six during the twenty odd years of its existence. None of the appointments of the house have come to light during the recent work there, though Sister Saint-Arsène wrote that they had left it, in 1758, fully furnished.⁴⁵ Despite the horrors of bombardment, and the starvation which they shared with the inhabitants, the Sisters and their property seem to have been unmolested. Nothing remains of the convent in this ghost citadel but a few small relics in the Museum – a thimble, a silver cross, a medal – and, on the site itself, the lower walls of the house. Between the stones, marguerites grow in abundance and toss gaily back and forth in the wind which comes from the ever-angry sea that washes the shores of the dead city.

A hundred years were to go by before Sisters of the Congregation again set foot on Nova Scotia. They returned to Cape Breton, not, indeed, to the old fortress of Louisbourg, but to the remote French town of Arichat, on Ile Madame.⁴⁶ The year was 1856. Arichat was then the episcopal see of Bishop Colin Francis MacKinnon, who had made the long journey to Montreal to request the establishment of a school. With his Secretary, Father William B. MacLeod, he travelled with the Sisters to their new field of labour. Something of the old French military spirit must have survived on the island, for the vessel which brought the Bishop and the new missionaries from Boston was greeted by

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, V, p. 91.

⁴² *Ibid.*, V, p. 97.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, V, p. 114.

⁴⁴ MS., “Plan de Louisbourg,” C. N. D. Archives: “Plans divers, 16b.”

⁴⁵ *Hist. de la Cong.*, IV, p. 373.

⁴⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, the information on Arichat has been gleaned from an abstract of the Annals of Arichat Convent in the C. N. D. Archives at Montreal.

a salute from the cannon as well as by the ringing of the church bells. The clergy came down in solemn procession and led them to the Cathedral, and the Sisters were given places in the sanctuary for Benediction and the singing of the *Te Deum*. Still in the secular garb they had worn for the trip, the Sisters then proceeded to the Bishop's residence.

As in the first official establishment at Louisbourg, the Superior of the group was the ex-Superior General, Mother Sainte-Elizabeth. Sister Saint-Jean-de-la-Croix (the former Marie-Sophie Dubuc) and Sister Sainte-Mathilde (Murphy) were her companions. For two weeks they lodged with Miss Maranda, who was not only a gracious hostess but a generous benefactor. The blessing of their house by Father Hubert Girroir, the Cathedral Rector, was done with all solemnity. Classes opened – *mirabile dictu* – on June 26, and the numbers rose in a few days from ninety-four to one hundred pupils. Shortly after this, Bishop MacKinnon set out on his Pastoral Visit, and left the missionaries under the canonical jurisdiction of two ecclesiastics who knew no French. The Sisters spoke no English. But communication was somehow established, for on his return the Bishop found them normal, healthy and amenable to his suggestion that they open a boarding school, given larger quarters. Mother Sainte-Elizabeth had meanwhile returned to Montreal after four months' stay. The Superior was now Sister Saint-Jean-de-la-Croix, a Sister five years professed, who had been allowed to pronounce her perpetual vows a year ahead of schedule that she might leave for the new mission. She was to revisit Arichat in 1886 as Superior General of her Congregation. She governed the convent there for the first four years of its existence.

The generosity and kindness of Bishop MacKinnon is recorded on almost every page of the Arichat annals. His presents were constant and varied: barrels of flour, bags of sugar, cases of tea, and even a cow, over which the annalist threatens to become ecstatic: "une belle vache!" In December of that year came His Lordship's greatest gift, a chapel in the Convent. He provided the altar, the vestments, the sacred vessels. The Rector gave crystal chandeliers and a silver sanctuary lamp, a carpet and the altar linens. The clock was the gift of Miss Maranda.

In June 1857, Arichat Convent held its first "commencement." It was the period of public examinations in the most literal sense: oral tests in the presence of the Bishop and several priests as well as other notables of the town and the district. *The Casket* for June 25⁴⁷ of that year has an account of this formidable function which carries the interesting "byline": *Milesius Hibernus Catholicus*. The passage would lose greatly by paraphrase, and has, moreover, some interest as leisurely journalism:

On Tuesday, the 9th of this month, the Bishop accompanied by the good and amiable cure of the parish and the parochial clergymen on a visit to his hospitable dome [sic], visited the convent of the Nuns of the Congregation –

⁴⁷ *The Casket*, Antigonish, V, No. 26, June 25, 1857, [p. 1.].

now nearly a year established in this place – for the purpose of examining the children. On his entering the door of the Convent, he was received in a manner which spoke trumpet-tongued in favour of the love, respect, veneration and confidence they have in their good Bishop. A beautiful air was played on the piano by the best performers on that instrument in that establishment, to do him honour, and which produced a soul-stirring and a most heart-touching effect. The examinations, which lasted for two days, then took place; the children, who were all dressed in a neat blue uniform, were examined in French and in English, and in English and French, and in the parsing of both languages, in which they showed great tact. They were also examined in Geography, Maps, Sacred, and Profane History, in a manner which gave universal satisfaction.⁴⁸

In 1859, Bishop MacKinnon made over to the Sisters for the “time of their stay in Arichat,” a convent which he had planned and built for them. The building was a two-story residence, some sixty feet long and forty deep, and having grounds measuring two hundred and seventy feet in length and four hundred and fifty-nine in depth⁴⁹ – doubtless the distance down to the harbour. The following year (1860) Miss Marauda willed to the Sisters a furnished house and some surrounding land, on the condition that it should be used by them or revert to the parish. She also left them a legacy of £25. The records show a Government grant of \$270 yearly and a School Board salary or grant of \$290.⁵⁰ From the beginning, the Sisters taught not only a varied curriculum, but one in line with that demanded by the Board of Education of that time. An account of Bishop MacKinnon’s pastoral visit of 1861 states that “111 pupils, all arrayed in snow-white robes, afforded a highly enlightened audience the clearest proofs of their progress in refined female education.” The same account mentions the Brothers of the Christian Schools as teaching the boys of the district, and notes that “both institutions are on a very permanent footing.”⁵¹ By 1863, Arichat is said to be “not far behind Halifax, the metropolis of Nova Scotia, in the great race for general prosperity.”⁵² The students of that year again went through the “severe ordeal of a most searching examination in the presence of His Lordship, the Bishop of Arichat, with some nine or ten of his priests,” and entertained the guests with two dramas, the one French, the other English which were distinguished by the students’ “well-modulated voices, ... correct pronunciation ... and a truly natural and cultivated style of elocution.”⁵³

If life was simple, it was dignified. It was not free, however, from the vicissitudes which always beset work for God and religion. In that same year of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *MS.*, C. N. D. Archives, “Plans et Notes sur les Maisons de l’Institut,” p. 56. Also, *MS.*, “Plans divers,” 16a.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *The Casket*, X, new series, September 5, 1861 [p. 21].

⁵² *The Casket*, Antigonish, XII, new series no. 3, July 30, 1863 [p.2].

⁵³ *Ibid.*

1863, a pupil resident at the convent developed a severe case of measles. Despite the devotedness of the Sisters and the diagnosis of the local physician – he thought the young girl in no danger – she died shortly afterwards as a result of this illness.. A campaign was launched to smirch the reputation of the Congregation Sisters, and they were accused of negligence and incompetence. But the loyal support of the Bishop and his clergy turned the attack into what we might now call ‘good publicity.’” The convent survived and prospered, and by 1864 was too small for the twenty seven boarders and five Sisters who resided there.

Dr. John Cameron had already begun, as Rector of the Cathedral, his long association with the Congregation of Notre Dame at Arichat and at Antigonish. When the Bishop and twelve priests were invited by him to preside at the closing exercises of 1864, Dr. Cameron made plans with His Lordship to appeal to the clergy for financial help. At supper, Bishop MacKinnon asked his priests for aid in enlarging the convent. The contribution totalled \$860. A bazaar held somewhat later yielded \$800.⁵⁴ The entire history of the Arichat establishment is a chronicle of generous giving and loyal support on the part of the diocesan clergy. By 1868, the convent had a new wing of forty-two by forty feet.⁵⁵

In the summer of 1866, Dr. Cameron and Father James Quinan (Senior), the parish priest at Sydney, and already a benefactor of the convent (he had given the Sisters their double windows)⁵⁶ were making farsighted plans to bring the Sisters of Arichat to Louisbourg to visit the ruins of the old Congregation convent there. In those days of slow and difficult transportation it was no small undertaking. Finally, on the morning of August 7 (1866),⁵⁷ Dr. Cameron, Father Girroir and seven Congregation Sisters stood on a pier belonging to, Benjamin Forest, Captain of the brig *Ben Nevis*. The Captain’s mother received the Sisters on board. A high wind sent the vessel flying towards North Sydney. The Sisters had the large cabin entirely to themselves. Bad weather kept them a few hours at Cow Bay, but the next day at two o’clock they were welcomed by Father Quinan at North Sydney. A steamboat took them across the harbour to Sydney, and the three priests and seven religious walked through the streets to the Glebe House. They remained at Sydney until Friday, with Miss Quinan as their hostess in the presbytery. They cultivated the social graces, received callers, made visits to the city, and had a musical evening which ended at the respectable hour of nine o’clock. They even received a telegram. On Friday morning, nine carriages drew up before the parish house to take them to the old fortress. The annalist comments on Father Quinan’s tact in arranging the groups. A rainstorm did little

⁵⁴ MS., C. N. D. Archives, “Abstract of Annals of Arichat.”

⁵⁵ MS., C. N. D. Archives, “Plans et Notes...,” p. 56.

⁵⁶ MS., C. N. D. Archives, “Abstract of Annals of Arichat.”

⁵⁷ The entire account of this trip to Louisbourg is taken from a copy of a manuscript written by Sister Saint-Claude (one of those who made the trip) and sent to the Mother House at Montreal: “Relation du Voyage de nos Sœurs à Louisbourg.”

to dampen their pilgrim spirits: they opened their large Victorian umbrellas, wrapped themselves up in canvas coverings, and continued their journey. Emotion runs high as the annalist describes the visit to the ruins, where the marguerites grow in abundance over the old scars. Captain Forest shared their feeling, for he was the descendant of a French officer who had spent eighteen days on a small island, without food, during the siege of the town.

The hour of departure for Arichat was dignified by a formal speech of adieu by Father Quinan, and Father Girroir solemnly expressed the gratitude of the Sisters. The return journey on the schooner *Syntax* was quite colourful. The crew under the command of Captain Forest, Senior, consisted of an idiot, a deaf-mute and a boy of twelve or thirteen. As there was but one small cabin, the Captain had fitted up the hold with one large bed and several bales of hay. Those who were seasick shared the bed, while the more vigorous lay comfortably on the hay. The schooner docked at Arichat harbour on Saturday, at three o'clock in the afternoon. The entire trip had taken five days. The annalist concludes on a note of gratitude, and adds that, owing to the generosity of "messieurs les prêtres," the expedition had cost the Sisters something under \$2.00. She does not list the items of such prodigal expenditure.

From 1863, Congregation Sisters had been teaching in Acadiaville, or West Arichat, in a so-called "public school."⁵⁸ We again find the name of Benjamin Forest listed as a benefactor with that of Madame Désiré Leblanc. The first experience of the two Sisters who pioneered in Acadiaville was the discovery that their house was haunted. Each night the residence became alive with the clanking of chains and the sound of deep groans. One winter midnight the noise reached a climax. Suddenly, one of the Sisters saw a ghostly figure bending over her companion's bed. Terrified, they dashed out of the house barefoot and in night attire, and made their way to their nearest neighbour, Madame Leblanc. The following day the Sisters' habits were fetched in a basket by Madame's servant-girl. The house was abandoned, and eventually torn down, says the annalist, for no one would either rent it or buy it.⁵⁹

The region of West Arichat was somewhat poor, and the Sisters suffered a good deal of hardship, but the people were generous and loyal. In 1892 the school had an enrollment of one hundred. By 1894, the registration had dropped to sixty-five. The gradual decrease in population made it feasible for the one convent at Arichat to teach the children of both regions,⁶⁰ and after thirty-one years of service, the mission closed.⁶¹

The convent at Arichat continued to prosper for a number of years. Some idea of the curriculum may be obtained from an advertisement in *The Aurora* in 1884:

⁵⁸ MS., C. N. D., "Abstract of Annals of Acadiaville, or West Arichat."

⁵⁹ I have since heard that the proprietor obtained the house by murdering the former owner. I have no documentary evidence for this belief.

⁶⁰ See note 58.

⁶¹ *Annales*, C. N. D., 7^e année, septembre, 1901, p. 239.

YOUNG LADIES' ACADEMY, ARICHAT

Under the Direction of the Sisters of Congregation of Notre Dame. The Course of Instruction comprises French and English Languages, Writing, Arithmetic, Bookkeeping, Algebra, Geometry, Geography and the Use of the Globes, Ancient History, Rhetoric, Botany, Philosophy, Chemistry, Music, Vocal and Instrumental, Drawing and Painting, every kind of Useful and Ornamental Needlework, and in general all the branches of a complete female education. The scholastic year begins September 1st and ends July 15th. It includes ten and a half months.

There follows a list of the terms:

Board and Complete Course of Studies in French and in English with Fancy work and Plain Sewing, per week, \$1.50. Music: Piano .50, Vocal .25. Drawing and Painting, .25. Bed and Bedding if furnished by the Institution .05 per week. Washing, if done by the Institution, .20. Costume, black dress worn on Sundays.⁶²

The Convent became widely renowned for its needlework of various kinds, and its "hair-work." Many old houses in Nova Scotia hold as heirlooms the fire-screens and other pieces of embroidery made by pupils and Sisters during those early years of Arichat Convent.

Many colourful personalities, whose zeal and high thinking made living noble and sacrificial, were associated with the Academy during the forty-five years of its existence. The great Bishop MacKinnon first escorted the Sisters from Montreal to his episcopal see. Bishop Cameron was their lifelong friend and protector. It was he who, in 1874, went down to Lennox Passage with his priests and an escort of twelve carriages to meet Mother Superior General on her official visit. Father Neil MacNeil, the future Archbishop of Toronto, was in 1891 the Pastor of Acadiaville (West Arichat). Learned and zealous, these priestly men were also skilled in the art of living, and knew how to couple dignity with simplicity, even, at times, with poverty.

Among the Sisters was that strong and kindly personality, Sister Saint-Zéphyrin, who governed Arichat Convent for twenty years. Associated with her in the years of progress was Sister Saint Maurice, a woman whose love for children almost rivalled her love for God. She gave twenty-eight years of her life to Arichat as teacher and Superior, and became Superior of Mount St. Bernard in the opening years of the twentieth century. Sister Saint Maurice had a remarkable family background, for she was born in prison. Her father, Francis Collins, was one of the fiery patriots jailed for participation in the Revolt of '37 in Upper Canada. His wife refused to be separated from her husband and became a prisoner with him. Their child was born when he was still serving his

⁶² *The Aurora*, Antigonish, V, February 22, 1885 [p. 1].

sentence, and was given the name of “Liberty” Collins. Sister Saint Maurice knew Arichat in its early days of hard beginnings, and her influence, still very great on many hearts and minds, was that of generosity and a holy life.⁶³

When the convent closed in 1901 because of the decreasing population and increasing financial difficulties, a chapter of pioneer history was at an end. The Congregation had already opened two new houses in Nova Scotia: Stella Maris of Pictou in 1880, and St. Bernard’s, in Antigonish, in 1883.⁶⁴ Everywhere in this new country the Sisters struggled with poverty and worked unceasingly with inadequate numbers. But in all their fields of labour they had the fortifying example of men who were leading as sacrificial a life as theirs, the generous and zealous diocesan clergy of the rural areas.

Some confusion exists as to the relation of Mount Saint Bernard (formerly St. Bernard’s Convent) to the house at Arichat. Founded in Antigonish in 1883 at the request of Bishop John Cameron, it existed for many years side by side with the older establishment, and did not, as it is sometimes inferred, replace it. The error has arisen, perhaps, from the fact that many of the Sisters who served on the Arichat mission were later transferred to Antigonish. Sister Saint-Zéphyrin and Sister Saint Maurice governed each house at different periods.

The position of Mount Saint Bernard is unique in the history of Catholicism in Canada, for it was the first Catholic college to give degrees to women. Its place as an integral part of St. Francis Xavier University, with ten of its Sisters full-time professors on the University staff, is equally significant. It has a Home Economics department whose annals date back twenty-five years to the very beginnings of the movement towards degrees in that field. During the seventy years of its existence its influence on the rural as well as the urban areas has been of prime importance in raising the standard of what our Victorian ancestors called with such exactitude, “female education,” especially as this affects the home and the family. As a College it dates back sixty years. Since the first degrees were given in 1897, women have left it to follow every type of career in the modern world. Graduates in Arts and in Science have gone into the professional world year after year in increasing numbers.⁶⁵ From 1685 to 1953 – the dates are far removed in time, – but the ideal remains unchanged. Mother Bourgeoys and her first followers went out to “gather up the drops of the blood of Christ which were lost through the ignorance of nations”: we call it the doctrine of the Mystical Body. The early Sisters of the Congregation taught children how to pray and young women how to spin and weave: we call it integration.

⁶³ C. N. D. Archives, MSS., *Annals and Community Necrologies*; for information on Sister Saint Maurice, I am also indebted to those who knew her as teacher or Superior.

⁶⁴ C. N. D. Archives, *MS.*, “Annals.”

⁶⁵ Mount Saint Bernard Archives, *MS.*, “Annals of Mount Saint Bernard.”