

PRESENTATION SISTERS 1993-6  
IN HOLY CROSS APOSTOLATES  
1903 - 1963

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It is ironic that legislation enacted by the anticlerical government of France at the beginning of the twentieth century unwittingly helped the apostolates of the Congregation of Holy Cross in the United States. Not only did it produce the occasion for the transfer of fourteen Holy Cross men to the United States<sup>1</sup> as well as twelve Marianite Sisters, but also resulted in a large number of French Presentation Sisters offering their services to five Holy Cross institutions in America.

The crisis developed in 1901 when in its determination to weaken the influence of the Catholic Church in France, the government of the Third French Republic passed the Law of Associations to control the Church's influence in education. The statute permitted the unhindered formation of all associations except religious, educational, and commercial associations connected with the Church. These latter were required to obtain specific governmental permission in order to operate. Those not so authorized could be dissolved by the government and their property confiscated.

By 1902 a new premier, Justin Combes, applied the law to almost three thousand schools. In 1904 all teaching by religious communities was forbidden, the law to be fully effective within ten years.

The Sisters of Mary of the Presentation (formerly known as the Daughters of St. Mary of the Presentation) were founded in 1826 in Broons in Brittany, France, by the parish priest, Father Joachim Fleury, in collaboration with two ladies of the town, Louise and Laurence Lemarchand. Their

the Willamette River, was a new apostolate for Holy Cross. A Methodist Church body had founded Portland University in 1891 and erected the still-existing five-story all-purpose West Hall (now known as Waldschmidt Hall) the next year. However the institution failed and was closed in 1900. The property was purchased by Archbishop Alexander Christie, renamed Columbia University, and reopened in September 1901 primarily as a college preparatory school under the auspices of the archdiocese. A year later it was sold to the Congregation of Holy Cross. It did not acquire its present name of University of Portland until 1935.

When the school opened under the new administration in September 1902 it had eleven teachers and ninety students the majority of whom were boarders. These, then, were the men and boys whom the Presentation Sisters would serve in their various occupations there.

Temporarily the Sisters lived in West Hall until construction of a separate convent was completed. This latter building, semi-secluded in a grove of trees, was erected under the direction of Brother Charles Harding in 1903. It was a three-story frame structure and was originally intended to house not only the Sisters but also to accommodate a small school for minims (young grade school boys) to be taught by the Sisters, a plan which never materialized. The wing intended for the youngsters became a student infirmary and residence for some members of the Holy Cross community. At first it was generally referred to as "the Convent" or "the White House" although officially it was named St. Mary's Hall. It was eventually razed in the 1960s.

The Sisters, under the leadership of their superior, Sister Theodule, lost no time in assuming their duties in the kitchen, the dining room, the laundry (even making their own soap), the infirmary, and the poultry yard.

James Covert in his history of the university reported this regarding the Sisters' cuisine:

Various views have been recorded about their

cooking. Some claimed the meals were exceedingly frugal and the diet too European, but others took delight in their tables, especially praising the pastry. As one former student recalled: "My brother and I knew where the back door was and we would just go in and say "How do you do?" in our best French. Anyway, they would catch on and we would get a cookie or a doughnut or something, and they would laugh and have a good time.<sup>2</sup>

Another alumnus had a more unpleasant memory:

Their frequent and steamy cabbage dishes would, especially around the lunch hour, produce a strong aroma that often combined with odors emanating from the chemistry labs. I remember that the combination of cabbage and sulphur odors could literally drive second-floor classes out of the building.

Brother David Martin who first came to Portland in 1928, recalled that at recreation the Sisters usually sat around a large room in St. Mary's Hall and sewed. So that "the waxed floor of their recreation room would always stay spick-and-span they moved around in this room by skating along on small pieces of carpet when they needed to go from one part of the room to another. . . . Despite their constant work they never seemed to get sick. I asked them about this once or twice to which they responded that they didn't have time to get sick."

As for wages, the original 1903 contract stipulated an annual payment of only 300 francs, or, in American terms, about \$58.00 a year for each Sister. Of course, board and lodging were covered.

On September 14, 1903, the steamer "Gascogne" arrived in New York bringing a group of twenty-seven Presentation Sisters. Father James Burns, superior at Holy Cross

College in Washington, D.C., and Doctor Albert Zahm, brother of Father John Zahm, the Holy Cross provincial, met the Sisters as they debarked and assisted them in getting on the way to their final destinations elsewhere in the country.

Twelve Sisters proceeded to their new home at Holy Cross College in New Orleans. This school, now simply called Holy Cross School, was founded in 1879 as St. Isidore College. There they were housed in a modest frame residence probably built in the early 1800s. It was surrounded by rose bushes, palm trees, oleanders, orange trees and banana plants--a setting which delighted the newcomers.

From their windows the Sisters could view the majestic Mississippi on whose bank the campus was located. And when they occasionally glimpsed the tricolor of France flying from one of the many ships passing on the river, they must have experienced a moment of homesickness for their beloved country from which they had been forced by unhappy circumstances. The many other evidences of the French background of the old city were also a comfort to the exiles. They did find the dispatch with which things were done here sometimes disconcerting. For example, one Sister writing from New Orleans to France reported that

we miss the beautiful and inspiring ceremonies of our churches in France. In America everything is done at full speed. Burials generally take place in the afternoon and consist of the singing of a "De Profundis" and a "Libera." Around the cemetery are thick, high walls with superposed openings which are closed hermetically once the coffin is inside of them.<sup>4</sup>

The daily labor of preparing meals for the faculty and the boarders, laundering and mending clothes, and caring for the sick was not easy, especially at first. A Sister writing to the motherhouse commented:

When we were chosen to go to America, several persons told me: "Over there everything is done by machinery." At Holy Cross, we found nothing of the kind: our muscles had to do everything. The first years were hard. Young and inexperienced as we were, we were not accustomed to this constant grind and the feverish activity of people for whom "time is money" But, with the help of God, Father Spillard's encouraging kindness and the example of our beloved Superior, Mother Tugdál, we have done the task.<sup>5</sup>

The Sisters gradually learned to speak English through the help of their chaplain, Father John Toohey, and a black orphan girl named Maria who had been sent to New Orleans by a French missionary priest where she shared both work and prayer with the Sisters.

Numerous Holy Cross Brothers of a later time recall with affection these Sisters and their self-sacrificing service. Brother Fisher Iwasko, writing in 1992, remembers that the Sisters were at work daily by 4 a.m. and that they rarely left the grounds. (They even refused the police's request that they leave during the destructive hurricane of 1947.

Occasionally a Brother would take a group of Sisters for a short outing in the area, but usually they relaxed on the convent porch conversing or listening to one of their number read from a book while they repaired clothing or knitted. Old-timers always mention Mother David who was the superior there for many years. She ministered to the sick boarders for whom she provided her famous cure-all--"soup and crackairs." Brother Fisher remembers his astonishment when he brought a boy to her who was suffering abdominal



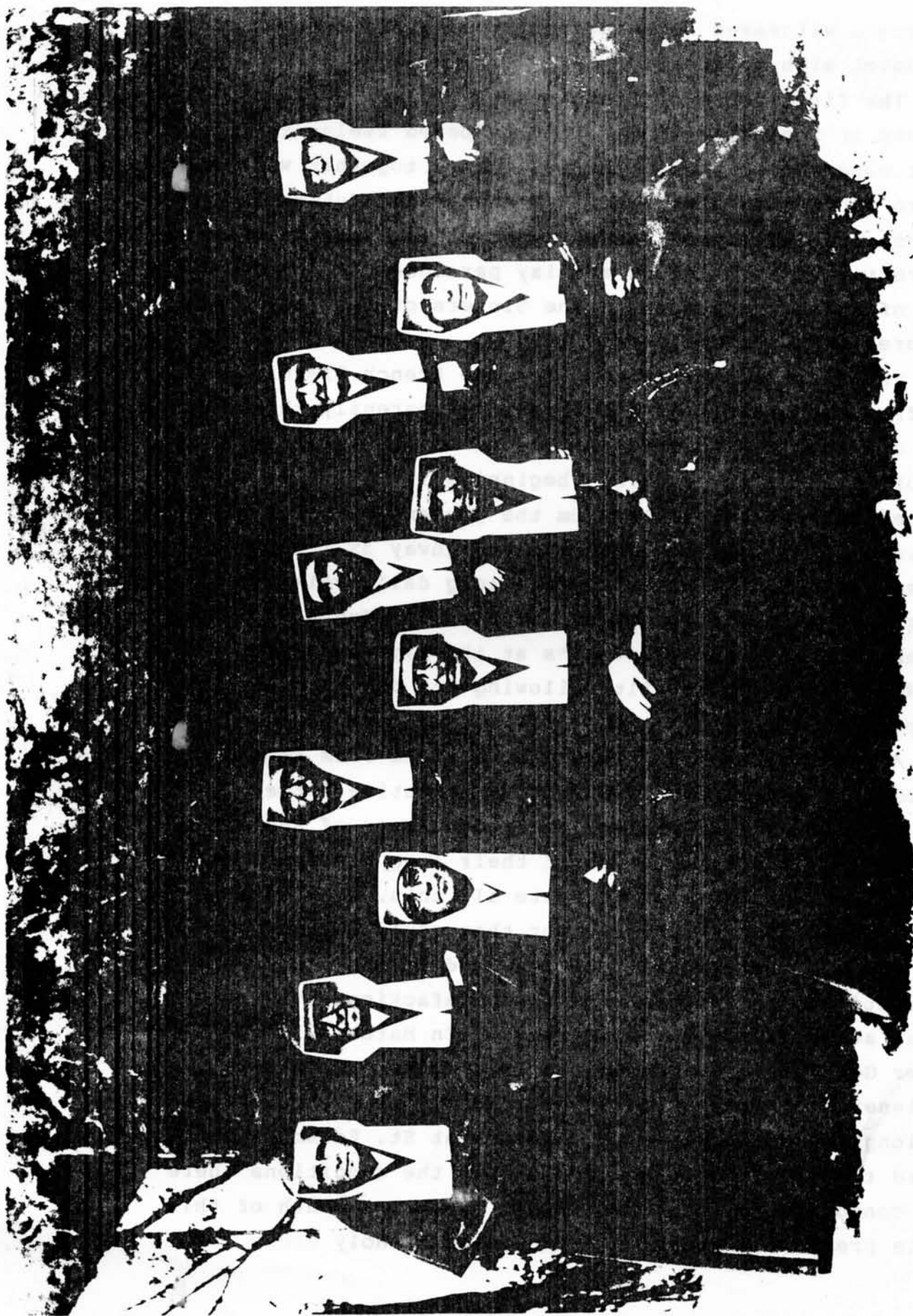
pains and witnessed her emergency treatment: she painted his navel with iodine.

The first group of Sisters sent to Austin, Texas, also arrived in September 1903. They numbered twelve including their superior, Mother Gregoire. They, together with six others who joined them later, were assigned duties in the kitchen, dining room, laundry, sacristies, and infirmary. Apparently male religious and lay personnel had been taking care of these charges since the Sisters of the Holy Cross withdrew from the college in 1896.

The first accommodations for the French Sisters were far from comfortable or convenient. Apparently the building they occupied was located on the old Doyle Farm from which the original campus evolved beginning in 1875. It was located about a half-mile from the present Main Building and east of what is now Interstate Highway 35. This, of course, required of the Sisters a long daily walk to reach their places of employment on campus. Incidentally, the Sisters arrived at St. Edward's at the time the main building was being rebuilt following its destruction by fire in April 1903.

According to a chronicler who visited from France, the newcomers found the accommodations "defective," the heat intense and depressing, their ignorance of English frustrating, the realization of their long distance from home saddening. However, despite all this, they tackled their duties with whatever vigor they could muster.

The Sisters gradually became used to their surroundings but continued to express some dissatisfaction with their living arrangements for some years. In March 1913 the Mother General in Europe stated in a letter to Father Morrissey, the provincial at Notre Dame, that she wondered how long she could leave the Sisters at St. Edward's but hinted that better housing would make the conditions there more conducive to their remaining. Within a month of this gentle pressure a decision was reached by Holy Cross



NEW ORLEANS - 1947. Front Row: Mother Amaury (on visit), Mother Guirec (provincial), Mother David (superior), Sr. Sigismund. Back row: Sr. Gemma, Sr. Anna, Sr. Anne of Jesus, Sr. Marie Theophile, Sr. Fabienne, Sr. Flavia.



authorities to build a convent close to the Main Building at a cost of \$11,000 which would be large enough to accommodate a student infirmary

Construction was soon underway and by August a cornerstone was installed in the northwest corner of the building. It is inscribed: "Presentation Convent, August 15 AD 1913" and can still be seen there today. After some delays the convent was completed and occupied by the eleven Sisters of the community in March 1914. An anonymous Sister later described the convent and its grounds:

Today the Sisters have a large, beautiful, fire-proof house, very comfortable with bathrooms and basement. The dining room is connected with the chapel, the doors of which are opened during the prayers before and after meals. They have a large parlor, simple, but yet well-furnished. There are open galleries on every floor where, in summer, if they wish, the Sisters can place cots and sleep in the open air. An enclosure, planted with fruit trees and grapevines, surrounds and isolates the convent. Each Sister takes care of her little garden bed and the Sisters vie with one another to have the most useful and most beautiful plot. This gentle rivalry contributes to the order of the convent surroundings, and the exercise in the open air is beneficial to the Sisters' health.<sup>6</sup>

This same anonymous writer mentions the plentiful fruit trees on the 850 acres of the campus farm, the 100 head of cattle that "roam freely on most of the land" and a number of red and black hogs, the insects of all kinds that swarm in the air, the beautiful birds. As for the human population of the area, the Sisters are amazed at the variety of people's complexions, the mixture of languages

heard on all sides, the number and variety of Protestant congregations in the city.

The constant demand on their services in the dining hall and laundry providing for the needs of faculty and students left little opportunity for the Sisters to see much of the Austin area, but the above-mentioned writer does describe one outing enjoyed greatly by the community. She wrote:

One of the most enjoyable distractions in the United States is a picnic. On the appointed day, a big stage coach drawn by four horses, stopped at the convent entrance. Father Superior, another Father, and all 18 Sisters found places in it. Even the cook deserted her kitchen range and let the butcher and a few students take over. The picnickers went about ten miles from the university to see the beautiful dams, waterfalls and canyons of the Colorado River. They visited the neighborhood of the radium ore mines also.<sup>7</sup>

The writer then goes on to say that they stopped at a shady place to partake of an enormous meal--"enough for fifty persons.". She adds that "the Sisters found such kindness and generosity rather confusing." but "kept a grateful remembrance of it."

As mentioned earlier, twenty-seven Sisters arrived in New York on September 14, 1903. Of these, five (Sisters Rose of Lima, Francoise, Bernadine, Gudule, and Jeanne de Valois, superior of the group) were assigned to serve at Holy Cross College, the Fathers' seminary in Brookland, a suburb of Washington, D.C. They were met by Father James Burns, the seminary superior, and Dr. Albert Zahm, a Notre Dame professor and brother of Father John Zahm, the American provincial. Dr. Zahm accompanied the Sisters on their train trip to Washington. One of the Sisters in the

group later wrote about their arrival:

At eleven o'clock at night, we arrived at the city of Washington, D.C. A carriage was waiting for us, and in half an hour we were at the college. A seminarian welcomed us, whether eloquently or not, I do not know; he spoke English and we did not understand one word. He led us to rooms which we guessed were to be ours and where without delay, after a short prayer, we lay down on our beds, while the seminarians who had stayed up to await our arrival, were eating the sumptuous ham and goodies prepared for us. Most likely, the young seminarian asked us if we cared to lunch before retiring, but not knowing what he was talking about, the only answer was: "Non, non, non" when we should have said: "Yes, by all means!" We could have done justice to the ham ourselves, but that is just one of those things we lost out on by not knowing the language.<sup>8</sup>

On the following morning one of the Fathers gave the newcomers a tour of the building and grounds. The latter, it was noted included a large vegetable garden and a henhouse "with five to six hundred good heavy white hens" which were to be under the care of the Sisters.

A temporary convent was provided in a wing of the seminary building but was soon to be replaced by a separate residence which would have a fenced and shaded garden for their use.

The Sisters lost no time in learning their duties, but their first days in the kitchen were far from a success. The chronicles reports that

The Sisters soon became aware that French cookery is not always relished by Americans. The attempts of our best cooks, their simple

wholesome seasoning, did not satisfy all tastes. Little by little, however, whether the Sisters, while learning the language, learned the customs of their new land or whether these good Americans came to acknowledge the superiority of our French cooking, the fact is that before long the whole college was unanimously in praise of Sister Gudule's excellent pastry.<sup>9</sup>

As for the laundry, the Sisters were happy to discover that the washing and drying were done by electric machines. The Sisters involved with sewing even found time to create beautiful vestments for the Holy Cross missionaries in Bengal.

In later years student Sisters preparing to teach in their schools in North Dakota lived in the Washington convent while pursuing studies at nearby Catholic University of America.

For their occasional outings in the area the Sisters especially enjoyed visiting the Franciscan Monastery a short distance away where they viewed with interest and devotion many reproductions and replicas of the sacred shrines of the Holy Lands and of the catacombs of Rome

A fifth group of Presentation Sisters were assigned to a Holy Cross apostolate quite different from the others, namely, St. Joseph Farm located about eight miles from the University of Notre Dame. Arriving there in September 1903, the party consisted of Sisters Fulbert Rebours (superior), Benoit Joseph Gallou, Marie Elzear Gesret, Emilienne **Bosce**, Bernardine Allaire, and Reine Derriennic.

The farm of over 1600 acres at this time was operated chiefly by Holy Cross Brothers to supply the University with milk, eggs, vegetables, and other foods. (Holy Cross Sisters had also worked there from 1873 to 1894.) The Presentation Sisters were not only put in charge of the kitchen, chapel, and laundry, but also made butter and raised chickens. Some also found time to teach catechism on Sundays to

neighborhood children. A special duty usually performed by Sister Fulbert, a nurse, was to care for Father Gilbert Francais following a stroke he suffered in 1926. He had taken up residence on the Farm in 1913 and lived there until his death in 1929.

As would be expected, a number of Presentation Sisters died while serving in these five Holy Cross institutions. The first was Sister Marie Bernard at New Orleans who died in 1904 just four months after arriving there. She was considered by some to be a "martyr" for, as infirmarian, she stayed by the bedside of a boy with a fatal illness though not well herself, and just a week after his death she too was gone. She was entombed in one of the city's cemeteries. In the following year Sister Albina had gone from New Orleans to the Sisters' hospital in Illinois and died there. In 1922 Sister Tugdal, the first superior, passed away on Christmas Eve, and in 1927 death closed the twenty-four years of service by Sister Estelle in the kitchen at Holy Cross. Sister Marie de Borgia followed her in 1944.

The first death on the Portland campus was that of Sister Ubald in 1910. The entire student body and faculty attended a Solemn Pontifical Requiem Mass offered by Bishop Alexander Christie in the college chapel. The deceased was buried in the Sisters of Providence plot in a cemetery in nearby Vancouver, Washington.

Two Sisters at St. Edward's University in Austin-- Sisters Ormonde and Raymond--died within a week of each other in 1938 and were buried in the Holy Cross community cemetery near the campus. At St. Joseph Farm Sisters Benoit Joseph and Sister Marie Elzear passed away in 1905 and 1907 respectively. They were first buried in a plot in what is now the front lawn there, but some years later their remains were moved to their community cemetery in Spring Valley, Illinois.



With the loss of personnel through death and advancing age and the need of replacements in their own institutions, it eventually became necessary for Presentation authorities to withdraw the Sisters from the Holy Cross apostolates.

The first group to be transferred to Presentation houses for retirement or active service there was that of St. Joseph Farm in December 1936. The last four Sisters there were taken by car to their convent in Spring Valley, Illinois, by Brother Roderic Grix, and their duties at the Farm were taken over by Holy Cross Brothers and hired laymen.

Two years later, in June 1938, the Sisters at St. Edward's University in Austin were withdrawn. The convent was renamed Sorin Hall in honor of Father Edward Sorin, founder of the school. Through the years since then it has been used as a dormitory, a residence for Holy Cross personnel, a candidate house, a scholasticate, and a convent for Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary who came there in 1966 to establish a coordinate college for women, an arrangement which gave way in four years to a coeducational model. Currently the old building is used for university offices and learning labs.

In 1940 the Sisters at the University of Portland were recalled to Spring Valley, and they were replaced by Notre Dame Sisters from Cleveland. The Sisters at New Orleans remained until June 1956. Their convent was used for a time by the Brothers, but it was dismantled in 1963 as part of an expansion program.

The last of the Presentation Sisters to depart from service to the Congregation of Holy Cross were those at Washington, D.C. The community had worked there for sixty years. They were replaced by eight Discalced Carmelite Sisters. This was in 1963.

In all these places Holy Cross members were sorry to see their dedicated co-workers depart. The students, too, were sorry. Perhaps the sentiment of all is best expressed by one "C. G." who, in a letter to the editor of the St. Edward's paper in 1937 wrote:



Front row: Sister Julia, (a visitor), Sr. Rose de  
Lima (superior)

Back row: \_\_\_\_\_; \_\_\_\_\_; Sr. Gemma, Sr. Mary Irene;  
Sr. Suzanne; Sr. Mary Charles

## EPILOGUE

The Presentation Sisters are long gone from Holy Cross institutions, but the seventy members in the United State Province today with headquarters in Valley City, North Dakota, are operating or assisting in four hospitals and a Care Center, four parish schools, a mission for Native Americans, a Newman Center, and a Retreat Center. They also work as ministers in several parishes and serve the aged and the handicapped. These are in North Dakota, Illinois, and Minnesota. Overseas they are helping in a mission in Uganda and operate a Retreat Center on Guernsey Island.

Following the years since 1903 when the Sisters were expelled from the schools in France, the community in Europe experienced many trials. Theirs is a long story which will not be treated here. Suffice it to mention that in 1914 a Decree of Dissolution of the congregation was issued by the French government, and the Sisters who had remained in Broons were evicted in the middle of the night. They sought refuge on Guernsey. It was not until November 1923 that the French authorities revoked the decree and once again the community was officially recognized by the government and the Sisters were able to freely reorganize their apostolate from their Motherhouse in Broons. Today the Presentation Sisters number close to 360 religious worldwide.

NOTES

1. Priests: Augustin Goupille, Georges Sauvage, Francis Lothon, Jean-Baptiste Delaunay  
 Brothers: Marie-Augustin Thibault, Joseph Baumgartner, Camille Coupee, Norbert BAuer, Maximilien Beatrix, Exupere Requeut, Frederic Gutbroc, Celestin Heller, Ernest Heller, Louis Gazagne.
2. James T. Covert, A Point of Pride: the University of Portland Story, Portland, Oregon, University of Portland Press, p. 39.
3. Portland Magazine, Autumn 1985, p. 15.
4. Anon., History of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mary of the Presentation of Broons, Vol. III, 1886-1920. English version, Chapter XII, p. 118.
5. Ibid., p. 116.
6. Ibid., p. 113.
7. Ibid., p. 114.
8. Ibid., p. 119.
9. Ibid., p. 120.
10. St. Edward's Echo, Austin, Texas, Vol. XVIII, No. 10, February 10, 1937

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