

Peterborough Congregation's Origins



In 1882 the Diocese of Peterborough was formed, taking in a huge area of the Province of Ontario stretching from the shores of Lake Ontario on to Georgian Bay and covering the length of Lake Superior and then all the way to the Manitoba border. This vast and rugged land was sparsely populated and difficult to traverse – the transcontinental railway did not reach Port Arthur and Fort William until 1886. The Toronto Congregation had opened a convent and school in Cobourg on the shores of Lake Ontario, as well as missions in both Port Arthur and Fort William at the head of Lake Superior. In Fort William Sisters took over an established orphanage and in Port Arthur they opened a convent and school, and then seeing an urgent need opened a hospital. These establishments would form the spark for the formation of a new Congregation for the young Diocese of Peterborough.

In 1889 the bishop of Peterborough, Richard O'Connor, was faced with a couple of concerning issues. In nearby Lindsay, the Loretto Sisters, who had operated a boarding school and day school since 1884, had notified him that they were withdrawing from Lindsay. This would leave the community without important faith education for the children.

At the same time, in the town of Peterborough an important project begun by his predecessor, Bishop Joseph Dowling, was nearing completion. Bishop Dowling had become aware that the young town was to have a hospital opened specifically and exclusively “for the benefit the Protestant population”. As word of this development reached his attention, he began making plans for a hospital whose vision would be more catholic. Bishop Dowling had purchased a site across the river in Ashburnham Village and hired local architect John Belcher to design the building. In 1889 Bishop Dowling was transferred to the Hamilton diocese and was succeeded by Bishop O'Connor. With work on the hospital building proceeding, there was a pressing need to staff this important endeavour.

Bishop O'Connor approached the leaders of the Toronto Sisters of St. Joseph, who already had schools and a hospital established in the Peterborough diocese. He asked the Sisters to agree to allow the formation of a new Congregation for the Peterborough diocese comprising of the Toronto Sisters' establishments already in the diocese, as well as staff for the new Peterborough hospital and the school in Lindsay to be assumed from the Loretto Sisters. He proposed that the magnificent convent and boarding school that the Loretto Sisters had built in Lindsay could serve as a motherhouse for the new Congregation.

With some trepidation, the Toronto Congregation generously agreed to this request. Fourteen of the Toronto Sisters already in the Peterborough diocese, and six additional volunteers committed the new Congregation to sustain the existing missions and take charge of the two new establishments.

In August of 1890 the construction of the new hospital neared completion. Under the direction of Mother M. de Pazzi, General Superior of the Toronto Congregation., those Sisters forming

the new Congregation who were close enough to Peterborough gathered in the empty building to hold retreat. At the same time the Sisters in Port Arthur and Fort William gathered for retreat there. Both groups participated in the election which resulted Mother Austin Doran being chosen as the first General Superior of the new congregation and a new Congregation was formed.

A few days later, on August 20, Bishop O'Connor presided over the dedication and official opening of the hospital. He proclaimed that "its doors will be open to the sick of all denominations, to Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant". The hospital served the Peterborough area until 1998 when changes in the health care system led the province to merge the two original Peterborough hospitals to form the Peterborough Regional Health Centre. It also gave rise to the House of Providence to care for the aged and infirm and St. Vincent's Orphanage.



A few days before the start of school, the Peterborough Sisters took possession of the convent and school in Lindsay and renamed it St. Joseph's Academy. With very limited staff the Sisters welcomed students to the school to begin the new school year, while at the same time the running affairs of the new Congregation. While the Motherhouse of the

Congregation moved to Mount St. Joseph in Peterborough, St. Joseph's Academy continued until 1966. Thus, with the generosity of the Toronto Sisters of St. Joseph, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peterborough began their work as an important force in the Peterborough diocese.

As the number of young women who joined the Congregation grew, the healthcare and education ministries expanded throughout Eastern and Northern Ontario, and into Western and Northern Canada. Many years later Sisters responded to the call to serve in Brazil, Zambia, and Mozambique. As this expansion beyond the diocese took place, the Congregation became a Congregation of Pontifical Right in 1957.

Just as the Toronto Congregation had facilitated the formation of the congregations in Hamilton, London and Peterborough dioceses, new congregations sprouted with the assistance of the Peterborough Congregation in the dioceses of Pembroke in 1921 and in Sault Ste. Marie in 1936. What started as serious concerns for a new bishop in the late 1800's became an undertaking that flourished and continues to bear fruit. The Peterborough story evolved further in 2012 when Peterborough joined forces with Hamilton, London, and Pembroke Congregations to form the new Sisters of St. Joseph in Canada.