

## **The Coming of the First Nun to Upper Canada**

by

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In 1748 the Huron Indian Mission of the Assumption was transferred from Bois Blanc Island at the mouth of the Detroit River to “la Pointe de Montréal” (now that part of the city of Windsor, Ontario, where Ambassador Bridge crosses into Canada). In 1767 this mission was erected as a parish to serve the Indians and also the French who had been settling on the Canadian side of the Detroit River since 1749. Father Pierre Potier, the last Jesuit missionary in the West, was its first pastor.

It is difficult to believe that a scholar like Father Potier did not make some effort for the elementary education of the children in his parish. Still we have no evidence of any attempt to start a school during his pastorate or that he himself taught the children anything but catechism. Two factors lead the writer to accept this as true. When Father Potier became pastor of the French in 1767, he was in his sixtieth year and his first love was for his Indians.

Father Potier died at Assumption on July 16, 1781, and was succeeded by Father Jean François Hubert who later became Bishop of Quebec. Father Hubert was a former superior of the Seminary of Quebec. It was natural that he would be greatly interested in the education of his new flock. He arrived at Assumption in November, 1781, and wasted no time before trying to remedy the educational situation.

On March 4, 1782, he obtained from the Huron Indians the grant of a tract of land six “arpents” in front by forty arpents in depth.<sup>1</sup> This was a joint donation to Father Hubert and to the Sisters of the Congregation who, it was hoped, would come to establish a school for girls. It is with the difficulties of obtaining sisters to come and take charge of this girls’ school that this paper will deal.

After obtaining this grant, Father Hubert must have written immediately to Bishop Briand of Quebec, for on March 26, 1782, the latter wrote to the Sisters of the Congregation at Montreal as follows:

I have nothing to add to the enclosed letter from M. Hubert. I cannot give you any motives more pressing than those he gave you – peoples without morals and without knowledge of religion which reforms them. This is the great object

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<sup>1</sup> *Wayne County Register*, Liber C, p. 158.

of the holy and zealous founders of your Congregation ... I pray Our Lord that He may inspire your community to consent to undertake this great work, and that He may give to those chosen for the work the courage and zeal to undertake it, the wisdom and prudence and all the other virtues necessary to conduct it well and to make their labours and cares useful for the glory of God and the salvation of those poor peoples.<sup>2</sup>

The sisters were more deliberate. It was the 12th of June before the reply came from the Sister Superior – a masterpiece of diplomatic language – requesting more time to study the question more carefully. I shall quote just one sentence from it. You will easily detect that note of sweet compliance blended with firm rejection.

Although we cannot hide from ourselves the great temporal burden and perhaps spiritual harm that might be caused to our community by the proposed new mission at Detroit, the matter seems to us so advantageous to the glory of God, so conformable to the obligations of our state and to the sentiments of zeal with which we are animated that, authorized by Your Excellency, we could not refuse it absolutely. But ...<sup>3</sup>

The letter goes on to say what superiors of nuns are still saying today – the congregation is short of sisters to staff its present institutions; nevertheless the proposal will be given due consideration.

In the meantime, the optimistic Father Hubert had written to the Sisters of the Congregation and arranged for their transportation to Assumption. On June 21, 1782, Sr. St. Ignace wrote to Father Hubert:

I had the honor of informing you on May 30th that I had received your two honored letters and the 2400 “livres” that I am keeping on deposit. I believe that much consideration will have to precede this establishment.<sup>4</sup>

After having weighed the advantages and disadvantages of the mission, the community turned it down. That was a sad day for the parishioners of Assumption and for its pastor. In 1785 Father was named coadjutor Bishop of Quebec and he took with him to Quebec his ambition of establishing a girls’ school at Assumption. Unable to obtain sisters, he would make a beginning with lay teachers. In 1786 he sent two laywomen teachers from Quebec and a school was opened that autumn.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Histoire de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Montréal*, Vol. V, p. 345.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>5</sup> Archives of the Archdiocese of Quebec, *E.U.* V, p. 47. Fr. Dufaux to Bishop Hubert, letter of Aug. 24, 1787.

Its success was very mediocre due mainly to its location and to the extreme poverty of the settlers. A large section of the parish was located at Petite Côte, south of Turkey Creek, five miles from the church and school. It was impossible for these children to commute daily to school. Their parents could not afford to board them at or near the school. Another major part of the parish extended along the river from the church to Lake St. Clair, a distance of about eight miles. Again it was impossible for the children living more than two or three miles away to come to school as day students. Apparently the school was located near the church with a view to getting the Sisters of the Congregation to come there.

Another factor that militated against its development is that it was not the custom in the diocese of Quebec to mix the boys and girls in parish schools. The educational problem might have been solved better by the establishment of two coeducational schools, one at Petite Côte and the other about three miles east of the church. It sounds ironical to say that two schools might have succeeded when it was so difficult to keep one operating due to lack of students. But it seems reasonable to suppose that a different arrangement would have produced very different results by providing educational opportunities within easy reach of nearly all the children of the parish. At least this is good hindsight.

In those days, education was not considered a function of the community. Rather it was a matter attended to, if at all, by the Church or by private individuals. Besides this parochial girls' school, started in 1786, private schools were opened during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1817 there were at least three schools in the parish conducted by lay people, two at Petite Côte and one east of the church. Two of these were mixed schools. At that time, having to close a boys' school near the church for lack of students, Father Marchand was hoping to start another school three miles upstream from the church where it would be more centrally located. In 1823 Father Marchand reported to the Bishop that several schools were being established in the parish. But these were mostly mixed schools. There were some exclusively for girls, but he feared that they would not continue for lack of numbers.<sup>6</sup>

That is the way matters stood until the creation of the Diocese of Kingston in 1826. The following year, Bishop Macdonnell paid a visit to Assumption and made plans to bring sisters to conduct the girls' school. Earlier, as Auxiliary of Quebec for the province of Upper Canada, he had appealed to the Grey Nuns to come and do some charitable and educational work in Kingston. They had declined because they had no English-speaking sisters, not enough subjects, and their sisters were not prepared for educational work.<sup>7</sup>

However, one of the Grey Nuns, Sr. Raizenne, who had been assistant-general since 1821, felt an attraction for this work but found no support in the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, H.C. IV, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *Sœurs Grises, L'Hôpital Général de Montréal*, p. 18.

community. She pleaded in vain to have her views shared by her confessor and her superior. Urged by the thought of obeying a call from heaven, Sr. Raizenne placed her plan before Bishop Lartigue, Auxiliary of Quebec for the district of Montreal. He was not opposed to the plan but saw little chance of it succeeding. Taking this reserve on the part of the bishop as a sort of tacit approval, Sr. Raizenne decided to attempt the undertaking even if it meant abandoning forever a house that had sheltered her for forty-four years and sisters she loved as her own family.<sup>8</sup>

The execution of her plan required colabourers. In the hope of winning over some of her companions in religion, she urged her superior to communicate the plan to the assembled community. A feeling of sad surprise greeted this revelation. Was this determination on the part of Sr. Raizenne an act of courage or of foolhardiness? All protested against this action, alleging great attachment to their community.

Seeing herself alone, Sr. Raizenne turned to her two nieces, Tharsile and Marcile Raizenne, who were living at St. Benoît. They were the children of her brother Ignatius, who was lawyer of the place. Since both girls wanted to consecrate themselves to the service of God, she would be able to win them over to her side. She would give them their religious formation, and, God blessing her efforts, this small mustard seed would become a large tree.

She received no encouragement from her brother Jérôme who was pastor of St. Roch de l'Achigan. He wrote to her:

You will be all alone with children whom you will have to form in two years. What will become of them if you should die before that time? You are now sixty-two years old.

Undaunted, she would go through with her plan. On March 13, 1828, she resigned as assistant-general of the Grey Nuns. A few days later, she received from the Bishop of Quebec, the following obedience:

Bernard Claude Panet, by the mercy of God and the favor of the Apostolic See, Bishop of Quebec.

To all who shall see these presents, be it known that in consequence of the request made by our dear Sister Marie Clothilde Raizenne, assistant of the Community of the General Hospital of Montreal, to permit her to leave her community, in order to form and establish another in the city of Kingston, Upper Canada, whose principal care will be the education of young girls, and being assured that His Excellency, Msgr. Alexander Macdonnell, Bishop of Rhesina and our suffragan, would be disposed to provide the said sister with the necessary means to undertake such an establishment, we have given and granted, do give and grant to our dear daughter, Sister Marie Clothilde

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41 sqq.

Raizenne, the present obedience to leave her community of the General Hospital in order to go and establish herself in the said city of Kingston and to live there in the observance of rules and constitutions which shall be drawn up by Msgr. Jean-Jacques Lartigue, Bishop of Telmesse, our suffragan for the district of Montreal, under the entire authority and jurisdiction of the said Bishop of Rhesina, consequently discharging her by this document (on condition that she will bind herself by simple vows to the education and instruction of young girls) of the particular vow that she has taken of consecrating herself to the care of the poor sick and also of all dependence on us where she has made her vow.

In faith of which we have sent this document sealed by us and by our secretary at Quebec, the eighth day of March, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-eight.

Signed Bernard Claude, Bishop of Quebec.

Signed N. C. Fortier, priest, secretary.<sup>9</sup>

Armed with this document, Sr. Raizenne was now free to pursue her plans. She was eager to get on to the field of her choice but she was plagued by delays. At Kingston, the bishop was very sick and his secretary wrote to her that the bishop was awaiting the arrival of a coadjutor before authorizing the new establishment. Then two months later, the same secretary wrote to her that it was no longer in his episcopal city but in the villages of Sandwich and Amherstburg that the bishop had decided to settle them, that there they would be in the midst of a Canadian (i.e. French) and Catholic population, but that nothing was prepared to receive them.

On May 23, 1828, Bishop Macdonnell wrote from Glengarry to Father Crevier at Sandwich.

I must not forget to acquaint you, that one of the Grey Nuns of the General Hospital of Montreal had felt for some time past a strong vocation to form a Religious Establishment in Upper Canada, and obtained the permission of her superior for that purpose. The object of her establishment would be to educate female children, and to take care of the sick. For this purpose she would require a building with two pretty spacious apartments, one for a kind of an Hospital, and another for a school, with one or two more apartments for herself and two or three companions who are anxious to follow her. She is very anxious and urgent with me to point out a situation for her. And taking into consideration her being a Canadian speaking the French language and several other circumstances, I cannot think of any situation so proper for her as the Western District. I therefore request you to consult your Marguillers (Church Wardens) and other gentlemen of the parish, and to inform me whether the plan we have been concerting last summer respecting the establishment of a school at Sandwich under the direction of Religious Women could be brought to a bearing on this occasion. You are directed hereby to convene your

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Marguillers and others of your parishioners interested in this affair, lay the matter before them, and communicate to me the result of their deliberations on the subject.<sup>10</sup>

A similar letter was addressed to Father Fluet, Pastor of Amherstburg and to Fr. William Fraser of Kingston.

On June 3, 1828, the bishop wrote to Sr. Raizenne that the establishment he wants to form is exclusively for education and that he expects her former Community will keep her until he has provided a suitable place for her in his diocese.<sup>11</sup>

Sr. Raizenne must have kept pressing for action during the summer. For on September 23, 1828, the bishop wrote to Fr. Fluet and to Mr. Hillier at Amherstburg to expect the sisters the next month, saying that until recently he had not expected the Religious to be going until next spring.<sup>12</sup>

The departure from the General Hospital at Montreal took place on October 9, 1828. Fearing she might give way to the emotions of the occasion, Mother Lemaire had absented herself under pretext of a necessary visit to Chateauguay. At one o'clock in the afternoon, a coach awaited the travellers. After bidding farewell to the community, Sr. Raizenne went to the church to be blessed by Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. At her side were her two nieces and a young English girl by the name of McCord who joined the others as a postulant. Ordered by Msgr. Lartigue no longer to wear the habit of the Grey Nuns, Sr. Raizenne was bringing a new habit of her own fashioning which she was to put on only after having received the consent of Bishop Macdonnell.<sup>13</sup>

Why were they being directed to Amherstburg and not to Sandwich? That's what the parishioners of Assumption (Sandwich) wanted to know. Francis Baby, member of Parliament, and the Marguillers sent separate letters to the bishop. On November 20, 1828, the bishop replied to both of them. The contents are substantially the same. I shall quote the reply addressed to the wardens of Assumption:

Gentlemen,

I have the honor of acknowledging the receipt by the last post of your favour without date praying that Sister Raizenne of the General Hospital of Montreal and her associates remain with you in Sandwich. I most readily comply with your wish and feel no small satisfaction in this precious advantage which Divine Providence has kindly thrown in your way of rearing your

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<sup>10</sup> Archives of the Archdiocese of Kingston. *Letters of Bishop Macdonnell*, Book I. Letter of May 23, 1828.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, letter of June 3, 1828.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, letters of Sept. 23, 1828.

<sup>13</sup> Sœurs Grises, *L'Hôpital Général de Montréal*, pp. 44-45.

children in the fear of God and knowledge of your holy religion. I have explained in my letter of this date to Mr. Francis Baby, your member, the reasons that occasioned the apparent change in the destination of these Religious Women which was entirely owing to omission or neglect on your own part or that of your pastor and not to any wish or intention of mine. All that I have further to add is that I trust that you and the rest of the parishioners of Sandwich will exert yourself to make the zealous and enterprising Sister Raizenne and her companions as comfortable as possible and afford them every facility for rendering themselves useful, praying the Almighty that He in His infinite goodness be graciously pleased to crown their labours with success.<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime, on November 3, Father Fluet had written complaining that the Sisters were being detained at Sandwich. He had announced their coming to the great joy of the people of Amherstburg. A choice of three houses was awaiting them.<sup>15</sup>

On December 29, 1828, the bishop replied explaining that Sandwich was the original destination of the sisters and promised to send others to Amherstburg within twelve or eighteen months “if God spare my life and provided you do not relax in your exertions to prepare and provide for such an institution.”

Apparently the sisters were satisfied to stay at Sandwich. For on December 26, 1828, Bishop Macdonnell wrote to Sr. Mary of the Incarnation, missionary of the Congregation of the Infant Jesus:

My dear spiritual daughter,

I received with unfeigned pleasure and satisfaction both your agreeable and esteemed favors of the 28th of October and the 15th current. The former had been delayed a long time on the way.

I am happy at the information you give me of your kind reception at Sandwich by all classes of the inhabitants and the active measures taken by the Curate and Marguillers of the parish to provide for your comforts and to provide for you the means of commencing your pious mission, on which I pray the Father of Mercies to shower down an abundance of His grace to enable you and your virtuous cooperators to carry it on successfully for the advancement of His Holy Religion.

I grant you most cheerfully my full permission to give the habit to your three companions whenever you judge proper and to allow the time since they set out from Montreal to be reckoned as so much of the time of their Novitiate. Their zeal and courage in the glorious cause in which they so cheerfully embarked entitle them to every indulgence which can be extended to them, of

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<sup>14</sup> *Letters of Bishop Macdonnell*, Book 1, p. 317. Letter of Nov. 20, 1828.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

which I have no doubt they will render themselves most deserving.<sup>16</sup>

It is unfortunate that the letters from Sr. Raizenne to which the bishop was replying are not extant. No doubt they would contain an abundance of interesting detail about their being waylaid at Sandwich while on their way to Amherstburg. However, we are fortunate in possessing one letter from Sr. Raizenne written to the Bishop of Quebec during the following summer that summarizes the events of her first nine months at Assumption.

At Sandwich  
July 14, 1829.

My Lord,

Your Excellency will kindly pardon me for the delay in giving you a report on the result of the obedience with which you honored me.

Our departure from Montreal was on the ninth of October and on the twenty-seventh we arrived without any accident. We occupy a fine house with all necessary conveniences as well as a fruit and vegetable garden. We get all this for the board and tuition of two young English girls. We have no troubles, thanks to the attention of our good and respectable founder, Father Crevier.

We teach to about fifty children reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, geography, drawing and we shall teach music as soon as we get a piano. Some of these courses are given by an American young lady who has joined us.

Bishop Macdonnell gave permission to give the habit to those who came up with me – the two Raizenne girls and an Irish girl. The ceremony took place on the feast of Pentecost in the Sandwich Church. Nothing was omitted by our good father who closed the ceremony with a sermon that touched all hearts especially mine. (Then she goes on with an eulogy of Father Crevier, suggesting that he would make a good Coadjutor. If she had a vote she would not hesitate a moment. Moreover, she would like to see Fr. Crevier's brother come to be assistant at Sandwich.)

With his (Fr. Crevier's) approval, our sisters took these names in religion: Saint Ignace, Saint Joseph and Saint Patrick. The last mentioned is Irish. Several candidates are presenting themselves but we are waiting until we get into our convent before receiving them ...

Your very humble and obedient servant,

Sr. Mary of the Incarnation,  
Missionary of the Congregation of the  
Infant Jesus.

P.S. - I forgot to mention to Your Excellency that if there were in your city one or two young ladies who desire to consecrate themselves to God and who know English and French grammar, geography, drawing and music, we

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, letter of Dec. 26, 1828.



would receive them gratis, but they would pay their own transportation.<sup>17</sup>

The kindness and piety of Sr. Raizenne, now bearing the religious name of Sr. Mary of the Incarnation, won all hearts. Her time was divided between the instruction of the children, the formation of her novices and the planning of a building which was to house the future colony.

This was too much for her sixty-two years and her weak constitution. After ten months, a cruel malady struck her and in a few days reduced her to extremity. On the 20th of August, 1829, less than ten months after her arrival at Sandwich, she breathed her last. We recall the prophetic appropriateness of her brother's query 'What will happen to them (the novices) if you should die before two years?' She had an answer. Even death was not going to shatter her dream.

On her deathbed, she had requested that her blood-sister, Sr. St. Jérôme of the Sisters of the Congregation of Montreal, be obtained to continue her work. Accordingly, Father Crevier wrote to Bishop Macdonnell who in turn wrote to the Auxiliary Bishop of Quebec, the superior of the Sulpician Seminary and the superior of the Sisters of the Congregation to use their influence and authority to send Sr. St. Jérôme to Sandwich as the successor to Sr. Raizenne. The result of all this pressure is contained in a letter written on September 28, 1829, by the Auxiliary Bishop of Quebec for the district of Montreal to Bishop Macdonnell. In part, it reads as follows:

Here is what I have been able to obtain from the Bishop and the sisters. The sisters will be ready, if you are willing, to send next spring a number of Sisters of the Congregation sufficient to establish at Sandwich a mission similar to those they have in Lower Canada, which will be under the dependence and under the same rule as the Motherhouse of Montreal. And consequently, there will be no question of the Institute of Sr. Raizenne, nor of incorporating in this mission those three young ladies who had accompanied the deceased sister, unless the community of Montreal finds them suitable to become sisters of the Congregation.

Then there are listed the rather stiff conditions that must be met before they leave. The letter concludes:

When Your Excellency has answered these various points, I shall try to close the deal with the Sisters of the Congregation. But it appears that Sr. St. Jerome, whom the deceased has requested to succeed her, will not be one of the future missionaries.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Archives of the Archdiocese of Quebec, H.C. 1V, p. 177.

<sup>18</sup> *Letters of Bishop Macdonnell*, Book II, p. 15.

The outcome of the subsequent correspondence on the matter appears in a letter dated March 24, 1830, from Bishop Macdonnell to Bishop Lartigue at Montreal. I quote from that letter:

...The Rev. M. Crevier, the Curate, as well as the Marguillers and the companions of Sr. Raizenne think the terms the good Sisters of the Congregation demand too hard. They are very reluctant that others should have the credit and merit of an undertaking of which they laid the foundation, and that at no small risk and hazard.<sup>19</sup>

An impasse had been reached. Sr. St. Jérôme did not come. Father Crevier did not write to the bishop during the next twelve months. But the novices must have sent him a despairing message. For on December 18, 1830, the bishop addressed a letter of encouragement to Sr. St. Patrick, novice of the Congregation of the Infant Jesus and her companions. Apparently the three were still together. This is the letter.

My dear spiritual daughters,

Those who put their trust in the Lord will not be confounded and you may be assured that whatever obstacles the world or the devil may throw in your way, God Almighty in Whose service you have enlisted, and Whose glory you wish to promote at so great a hazard of your health and even life, will remove those obstacles and difficulties. The enemy of souls, jealous of the good you are destined to do by your labours to the Catholics of the Western District, tries to discourage you, but your Heavenly Master will soon convince you that He permits those trials merely for the exercise of your patience and to teach you to put your confidence wholly in Himself. Have therefore good courage and you will soon be relieved from your present difficulties and embarrassments.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the next year, the bishop's letters urged the sisters to remain at Sandwich until his proposed visit. It was October, 1831, before the bishop came. A result of the visitation was that Father Crevier returned to the diocese of Quebec, and the bishop's nephew, Father Angus Macdonnell, stayed as pastor of Assumption. For the next seventeen months, the letters contain a series of promises that the convent will be built. That takes us to the end of March, 1833. In May of that year, Bishop Gaulin was appointed Coadjutor to the Bishop of Kingston with the right of succession. When there was only one bishop, a record of the correspondence was kept. With two bishops, the records are very scant and contain nothing about our story.

From the History of the Grey Nuns, we cull this little bit of information. "Shortly after the death of Sr. Raizenne, the three young novices who had shared

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61, letter of March 24, 1830.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112, letter of December 18, 1830.

the cares and works of this foundation, feeling that they were not able to continue the undertaking were dispersed. In 1870, Tharsile came to shelter her old age under our roof and end her days in the “salle des dames” in 1877, aged 74 years.”<sup>21</sup>

We may be inclined to ask with Sr. Raizenne’s former companions in religion, “Was this venture an act of courage or one of foolhardiness?” If the parishioners of Assumption had been asked the question, they would have answered “This was the action of a saint, a fool for Christ’s sake.” For many years after her death, the people could be seen praying over her tomb in the cemetery. When the present church was completed and the bodies of Fathers Potier, Dufaux and Marchand were translated under the sanctuary, at the insistence of the parishioners the body of Sr. Raizenne was buried not far from them, but outside the limits of the sanctuary.<sup>22</sup> To-day, on the left wall of the Church near the altar rail, there is a plaque that reads in part:

Buried under the Church  
Reverend Sister Clothilde Raizenne of the  
Congregation of the Infant Jesus.  
1766-1829

She is the only nun that can have that inscription over her tomb for she was the first and last to die in the Congregation of the Infant Jesus. Strangely enough, it appears that to the people of Sandwich she continued to be known as Sister Raizenne, the name she bore as a Grey Nun. That is also the name that appears in the Church Registry of Deaths. That is the resolute character that I have tried to rescue from a neglected past.

It had taken forty-six years (1782-1828) to bring the first nun to Upper Canada and her sojourn had lasted less than one year. Was it worth all the effort expended? The small mustard seed of the new Congregation did not become a large tree, but it was a seed or a grain planted in a distant corner of the Lord’s garden. In this connection, I like to think of the words of Our Lord: “Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die it bringeth forth much fruit.” (John XII-24) When the book of life is opened for all to see everything in its proper perspective, it may then be plain that this trail-blazing episode brought forth much fruit and that the parishioners of Assumption Church were correct in requesting that signal honor should be paid to Sr. Raizenne, the first nun to come to Upper Canada.

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<sup>21</sup> Sœurs Grises, *L’Hôpital Général de Montréal*, p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> Archives of St. Mary’s College, Montreal Letters of Fr. P. Point, S.J., pp. 99-100.