

Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary

By Robert Bunting

The Holy Names of Jesus and Mary is a Roman Catholic women's religious congregation established in accordance with Church law at Longueuil, Quebec, Canada, in 1844, for the Christian education of children and young girls. Twelve sisters arrived in Portland on October 21, 1859, to open St. Mary's Academy for girls, their first establishment outside Canada. Initial enrollment included Catholic and non-Catholics alike, something that would be a trademark for Holy Names undertakings. Other teaching assignments quickly followed at the Portland parish schools of St. Joseph's (1861), St. Patrick's (1885), and St. Francis (1886) and at Oregon City (1860), St. Paul (1861), Salem (1863), The Dalles (1864), Jacksonville (1865), Baker City (1872), and Astoria (1896).

In 1864, twelve additional sisters from Canada arrived to reinforce the original Oregon contingent. Then, in 1871, formal permission arrived to create a novitiate in Portland that would support further staffing of Oregon parish schools.

The Holy Names Sisters, in addition to their educational endeavors, undertook works of mercy that would characterize the history of the order (also known as a community or congregation) in Oregon. Shortly after their arrival, they began to visit sick Catholics and non-Catholics, comfort the dying, prepare the dead for burial, and take in orphans. During a smallpox epidemic in Jacksonville in 1869, the sisters closed their school to nurse the victims. In 1908, the sisters opened an orphanage at their Lake Oswego property.

In 1893, Portland's St. Mary's Academy's charter was amended to allow the school to award college degrees. Renamed St. Mary's Academy and College, it was the first four-year liberal arts college for women in Oregon and one of the first Catholic women's colleges in the United States. In 1912, the Order's provincial house had been moved to a site on the Willamette River south of Lake Oswego, and in 1930, the college was moved there. The following year, the college gained accreditation and was renamed Marylhurst College.

As the Archdiocese steadily grew in the early twentieth century, the educational responsibilities of the Holy Names Sisters similarly expanded, adding parish schools at Holy Redeemer (1908), St. Ignatius (1908), Madeleine (1912), and St. Philip Neri (1914) in Portland; at All Saints (1936) and St. Peters in Lents (1936); and at Bend (1936).

During the twentieth century, the Holy Names Sisters were active participants in the successful legal challenge that overturned the state's anti-Catholic school bill of 1922. In 1930, they opened the doors at Portland's St. Mary's Academy to African American students; in 1937, they established a pre-nursery through second grade school for Japanese children in Portland and helped staff a Catholic-sponsored, Portland interracial day nursery started in 1940. The Oregon Holy Names Sisters also had missionaries in Basutoland [Lesotho] beginning 1937 and Japan beginning 1933. In 1962, the sisters sent missionaries to Peru and Brazil.

In the 1970s, the Sisters of the Holy Names responded to declining numbers entering the community and lower Catholic school enrollments by withdrawing members from teaching in parochial schools. In 1974, Marylhurst College was transformed into a coed institution with a nontraditional "life-long learning" mission. In 2001, to serve both the community's needs and their own financial security, they constructed a retirement health-care center, Mary's Woods, on its Marylhurst property.

Holy Names Sisters continue to teach; to provide pastoral care in parishes, hospitals, and prisons; to serve the elderly; and to bear witness to social justice concerns. In 2009, the community shared the celebration of 150 years in Oregon with the state's sesquicentennial.

Sources

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