

Sister Mary Joseph Nugent

Maria Nugent had the unique distinction of being the first Presentation postulant and the first Mercy postulant in Newfoundland, and consequently in North America.

Maria was born in 1799 in Waterford, a city in southeastern Ireland that had significant commercial connections with Newfoundland at that time. Little is known about her early years, except that she had received a superior education and was accomplished in French and Italian literature, as well as in the Greek and Latin classics. Her skills were such that she translated several French and Italian works, one of which was used in Catholic schools throughout Ireland. She was said to have received her musical education from her uncle, Reverend Doctor Hurley of Kinsale.

In the early 1830s Maria joined the Ursuline Sisters in Waterford, but severe sciatica forced her to return home, just as her family was preparing to emigrate to Newfoundland. Her brother, John Valentine Nugent, had been invited by Bishop Fleming to set up a Catholic academy for young gentlemen in St. John's. Maria, her invalid mother, and Marianne Creedon, sister of John Valentine's wife Ellen, joined John Valentine, Ellen and their children on the voyage to Newfoundland, arriving in St. John's in May of 1833. Maria's mother died within two weeks of their arrival, but the rest of the family settled quickly into their new life.

A notice in the *Public Ledger* of June 14, 1833 advertised the academy for young gentlemen under the direction of Mr. John Valentine Nugent, as well as a school for young ladies, under the direction of Mrs. Ellen Nugent and Miss Maria Nugent. The extensive curriculum of the school for young ladies included an amazing array of subjects – "instruction in the Italian, French and English Languages, Geography, History, Needle and Fancy

Work, Mezzo-Tinto Drawing, Oriental Tinting, Mother-of-Pearl and Setim-wood inlaying, Waxworks, etc., etc.” The notice went on to announce that music lessons would be offered by Misses Maria Nugent and Marianne Creedon. What a gift this family was to the Catholic citizens of St. John’s!

Within a short time of the family’s arrival in St. John’s, Maria had regained her health and asked to enter the Presentation Convent, which had very recently been established in St. John’s, due largely to the efforts of Bishop Fleming. She was the first to enter the Presentation Sisters in Newfoundland and was considered a promising candidate. On August 5, 1834 Maria Nugent was received into the novitiate, but her delicate health again became a problem. The Presentation Sisters, hopeful that she would become well, granted her a second novitiate, but ill health finally forced her to leave. Following her departure from the Presentation Sisters, Maria became a virtual recluse, devoting herself to the education of her brother’s children and doing her work of translation. During several of these years, Marianne Creedon was still living with the Nugents, and it is likely that she and Maria shared many confidences and many dreams. In 1839 Marianne left St. John’s for Dublin to begin her novitiate with Catholic McAuley, in preparation for beginning a Mercy foundation in Newfoundland.

In June of 1842, when Marianne, now Sister Mary Francis, and her two companions arrived in St. John’s to open a Convent of Mercy, Maria’s desire for religious life was reawakened. Sometime later in 1842, she entered the Sisters of Mercy, where according to the Annals of the Presentation Sisters, preserved in their Archives in St. John’s, she felt that “at last she had found her true home.” It seems that at her entrance, or shortly thereafter, she was given the religious habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the name, Sister Mary Joseph. Bishop Fleming considered her novitiate with the Presentation Sisters sufficient preparation for profession and she made her profession of vows

as a Sister of Mercy on March 25, 1843. For reasons unknown, Bishop Fleming conducted the profession ceremony in the Presentation Convent at Cathedral Square in St. John's.

When Our Lady of Mercy School opened in May of 1843, Sister Mary Joseph's superb educational background, her musical proficiency, fluency in languages and teaching experience were huge assets to the school and the community at large. With four well qualified teachers, and students able to pay for their education, the future looked bright, and Bishop Fleming's dream of education for middle class girls seemed to be coming to fruition. But in November of 1843, the departure of Sisters Mary Ursula and Mary Rose left only Sister Mary Francis and Sister Mary Joseph to carry on the school responsibilities and the visitation of the sick. Undaunted by what might be seen as apparent failure, these two Sisters of Mercy, connected by bonds of family and love for the mission, continued the work of Mercy, to which they had pledged their lives.

In June of 1847 when a typhus epidemic raged through St. John's, Sister Mary Francis and Sister Mary Joseph were very much in evidence. They closed school and devoted all their time and energies to the sick, visiting and caring for them in their homes and in St. John's Hospital at Riverhead, located in the area of present-day Victoria Park. After spending a lengthy time with a young seaman who was dying from the disease and in grave spiritual anguish, Sister M. Joseph caught the dreaded fever and suffered its torments for two weeks. Despite the loving care she received from Sister M. Francis and the medical services of physicians, she died on June 17. Although her life as a Sister of Mercy was short, it was rich and full, and her untimely death was mourned as a public calamity.

At the time of her death, Sister Mary Joseph was forty-eight years of age and in the fourth year of her religious profession. She is buried with the other plague victims on land which Paul

O'Neill in *A Seaport Legacy* said is now occupied by the Kirk and extends to Queens Road and west to Long's Hill.

The Newfoundlander of June 24, 1847 wrote poignantly about this outstanding humanitarian and dedicated religious:

It has seldom occurred to us in the circle of our own community, to record an event which is at the same time so painfully bitter to her nearest and dearest connections, so sincerely regretted and fraught with such interest to the Catholic inhabitants of St. John's

... for in the whole community it would be difficult to point to a life of more importance to the spiritual and temporal interests of the juvenile portion of our Catholic population while to the more matured as well as to the sick and infirm of both sexes, her devotedness in administering to the comforts of the diseased whether of mind or body could only be surpassed by the untiring assiduity in which her heart and soul were engaged.

Source: Valiant Women by Charlotte Fitzpatrick rsm