



January 07, 2025

By Pat (Foley) Ruffing

Welcome and Goodbye

Bienvenue! Congrégation des Sœurs de Saint-Joseph de Bourg, Province de Crookston.
Au revoir! Liées aux ancêtres à tout jamais.

(Welcome! Congregation of Sisters of Saint-Joseph de Bourg, Crookston Province.
Goodbye! Linked to the ancestors forever.)

My French-Canadian maternal grandparents, Maximilien Perras and Nellie Toulouse solicitously pursued a high school education for their daughters, thereby linking their family history years with that of the St. Joseph Sisters for 100 years. Both Max and Nellie came to Red Lake County Minnesota as children in the 1880s. Their parents had immigrated to Minnesota from Canada, encouraged by other relatives already in Minnesota, and possibly influenced by Pierre Bottineau as well. They were married on June 4, 1894, in Terrebonne, Minnesota. The young Perras family, French-speaking and Catholic, sent my mother Rose Alma Perras, along with two of her sisters, Evelyn and Florence, to St. Joseph’s Academy boarding school in Crookston some 35 miles away, where the nuns spoke French, and other family relatives lived nearby.

The Sisters of St. Joseph from Bourg, France, were introduced to Minnesota in 1903. In excerpts from the article “Welcome and Goodbye” (as noted by the indented and *italicized* text that follows throughout) Sister Pat Murphy, CSJ, writes:

** The story of our order begins with Jesuit Priest, Father Jean Pierre Medaille and six women who became the first Sisters of St. Joseph. In the 1640s, Father Medaille, a teacher in what was the equivalent of today’s secondary schools, was assigned as an itinerant missionary to some of the towns such as LePuy to inspire listeners to be open to the grace of conversion and to counsel those who came to him for spiritual advice.*

Father Medaille met women in these small towns who shared his vision of the needs of the Church and society. The women desired to form a community to support each other as they responded to those needs.

France was a country ripe for the Revolution that was to sweep over it in the next century. For many years, the country had been torn apart by wars... The French Revolution (1789–1799) disrupted every aspect of life. The Congregation was disbanded. The “goodbyes” then were acts of faith in the providence of God.

New leadership emerged in the person of Mother St. John Fontbonne who is recognized now as the re-founder of the Order in Lyons, France, in 1807, and who was miraculously saved from death by guillotine.

Due to changing diocesan boundaries and reorganization, some of the Sisters, now separated from the Lyons Motherhouse and moved to Bourg in the Diocese of Belley. Between 1854 and 1903, the Motherhouse in Bourg assigned Sisters to new ministries in the “new world.” Our Sisters moved to Bay St. Louis, Mississippi; New Orleans, Louisiana; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Argyle, Minnesota.

The first Sisters of St. Joseph from the Motherhouse in Bourg came to St. Rose Parish in Argyle in 1903...

With some concerns about the invitation of Father J.M. Barras, pastor of St. Rose Parish, to staff a school, manage an orphanage and a 3-4-room hospital in Argyle, the group of six Sisters sailed from Le Havre, France.



Catholic Convent – Argyle, Minnesota

After discovering his bishop did not want the Sisters to come to the diocese, the pastor sent a telegram saying the Sisters should not come. This communication arrived after the Sisters were already in New York, but Mother Jeanne did not share this piece of information with her five companions.

She responded to Father Barras that their trunks were packed and they were coming...

Fortunately, Divine Providence had long before directed events that would lead to the welcome of the Sisters. The Chancellor of the Diocese of Duluth, Father Timothy Corbett, had studied at the Minor Seminary in Meximieux, France. Sisters of St. Joseph of Bourg served in the infirmary and linen-room of the seminary. Thus Fr. Corbett could vouch for the religious life of the group and warmly welcomed the pioneer Sisters. (First 100 Years of St. Rose of Lima Parish 1879–1979)

On August 22, 1903, the six Sisters were joined by two other Sisters of St. Joseph living in a small Iowa town. The Sisters must have been chagrined to learn that Father Barras wished to have classes begin immediately.

The Sisters persuaded him to give them eight days to prepare for the opening of the school. Records are incomplete and terse, documenting, “Numerous students came”...

The ministries of the “French” Sisters had hardly begun when three of them traveled from Argyle to Crookston, 40 miles south to open an elementary school in 1905. A two-story brick convent and school were established as St. Joseph’s Academy on Houston Avenue. Shortly, a third story was added to accommodate a chapel and living quarters for high school girls.

Sisters living in Minnesota and Wisconsin made the trip to the Motherhouse in Bourg where they lived during their Novitiate, the initial formation period which lasted 1-2 years, and included Receiving the Holy Habit and Profession of Vows. The postulants and novices from Louisiana and Ohio attended the formation program at their local St. Joseph Centers or Provincial Houses.

During World War II, the young women from the Crookston area experienced the war — sometimes with excitement due to a lack of understanding of the ramifications of war, sometimes with fear because they were not to speak in English and give away their nationality to German soldiers in the vicinity of the convent.

Following the war, the Sisters returned to Crookston, most of them suffering from tuberculosis. Some lived temporarily with extended family members in Crookston because St. Joseph’s Academy, the girls’ high school/boarding school and the Sisters’ convent were too crowded...



St. Joseph Academy – Crookston, Minnesota

My mother dreamed that her daughters would be able to attend her Alma Mater St. Joseph Academy in Crookston, Minnesota. Her wish was partially granted and thus began my journey through SJA 1957–1961.

After high school, I chose to enter St. Joseph's Convent in Crookston on August 15, 1961, and go through four years of formation and college at St. Joseph's Junior College where I met every one of the Crookston Province nuns.



Pat Foley, 1961 SJA Graduation



Bride of Christ, May 16, 1962

The nuns were still in the traditional St. Joseph habit: the gabardine long black dress with a black cincture (belt) supporting a huge rosary on the side; white linen wimple (that covers the head and forehead, and frames the face); white linen guimpe (a kind of short cape that sets beneath the wimple, ties at the neck, and modestly covers the neck, shoulders and chest); black veil and under veil (that are secured with pins or small clasps to a coif, or wimple); long black stockings; sturdy black-laced shoes; and a shawl for winter. After two years as a novice, with a profession of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, a simple black cross was worn on the chest, and with perpetual vows three years later, a crucifix replaced the cross.



Sister Mary Damien and Her Mother Alma Foley

The Diocese of Crookston was created in 1910 separating it from the Diocese of Duluth. Bishop Timothy Corbett served as bishop from 1910–1938. At this time, several schools were staffed by Sisters of St. Joseph in Canada, Wisconsin, North Dakota, the Diocese of New Ulm, and the Archdiocese of Minneapolis/St. Paul.

St. Joseph's Hospital in Park Rapids was built and staffed by the Sisters. Later they purchased the community hospital in Baudette, naming it Trinity Hospital.

Both hospitals were sold in the 1970s. A longer and fuller account of St. Joseph's hospital can be found in a special area of the hospital dedicated to Sister Margaret Smith, CSJ.

The life and apostolic works of the Sisters of St. Joseph touched many people in the Diocese of Crookston besides school children and the medically ill. Summer religious education was on the calendar of nearly every parish for two full weeks each June.

Meals were prepared and served in several parishes by the mothers of the students. In fact, in one parish the mother of a large family not only prepared the food but enlisted other family members to bring the china and goblets from home to serve the two Sisters.

Another summer tradition for many years was to have the younger Sisters spend time at Lake Trails, not as campers but as workers. The other summer option was six weeks of Summer School at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul...

When the Crookston Catholic Elementary System was organized in 1968, it was largely due to the talents and vision of Sister Mary Thomas Egan, OSB, and Sister Anne Martina Ganser, CSJ. With the consolidation of the Catholic high schools, faculties also counted several members of both communities, including Sister George Ann (Janice Miller), CSJ, who taught religion and Sister Mary Edward, CSJ, (Elaine Dufresne), who were administrators.

One of Bishop Victor Balke's outreach efforts to invigorate and encourage ministry to and for high school students and young adults was TEC, Teens Encounter Christ. One of the first directors of those monthly retreat weekends in different parishes was Sister George Ann who drove her car loaded with cots, religious materials and snacks.

In response to the Pope's request to U.S. communities of women religious to send 10 percent of their membership to serve in developing countries, nearly 10 Sisters of St. Joseph from Crookston were chosen for that ministry, including Sister Marie Denise Gagner, CSJ and Sister Joanne Johnson, CSJ. They served with members of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Recife, Brazil.

A major building project ending in 1959–60 erected St. Joseph's Provincial House two miles east of Crookston and provided necessary space for the Novitiate, retirement accommodations for the senior Sisters with classrooms and study areas for the student sisters. Because the Sisters named objects and places around the property after persons they knew, part of the address of the Provincial House became "Marywood Road"...

In 1965 I became a student at Viterbo College in La Crosse, Wisconsin, where I graduated in 1967 with a BA in education in history, with minors in sociology and Latin. I received my new assignment by mail. I would teach 8th grade at St Anne's in Somerset, Wisconsin, and live in the convent behind St Anne's Cemetery and Church.



Sister Mary Damien, New Habit

My assignment at St. Anne's School, across Church Hill Highway, was a classroom full of 8th graders, to teach all subjects to, except science and religion as I recall. I vividly remember trying to teach the new math, which I tried to learn by night. I only taught in Somerset one school year. When I think back on that year, 1967–1968, my life was one of chapel, prayer, school, and back to the convent, very limited interaction with Somerset Catholic Church and in a culture experiencing major upheavals. The optimism of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 coincided with the social disruption of ideals in the U.S.: Nuns and priests believed they would be able to marry. The Vietnam War raged, the Civil Rights movement and the Women's movement were happening. The papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (Of Human Life) was issued in July 1968 on regulation of birth control. Nuns were jarred out of their traditional roles in the schools and hospitals and were reexamining their mission, exchanging their religious habits for street clothes, living in apartments, and leaving the convent by droves, returning to "the world."

In the summer of 1968, I was assigned to a Native American Mission in Dunseith, North Dakota, (the photo to the right is me preparing an outfit to wear at the Mission in Dunseith), and then on to Brady High School in West Saint Paul.



Getting Ready for Dunseith Mission

I left the convent in 1969 along with many others. It was at the decision-making time of whether I should make perpetual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that I chose to leave the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Sister Pat Murphy continues:

Our little group did not imagine as young Sisters as we began teaching and nursing in the '50s and '60s, that the religious order which we just entered would change and transform several times in our lifetime...

Through prayerful discernment in 1977, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Bourg was officially restructured. The three American Provinces of Crookston, Cincinnati, and New Orleans separated from the French Motherhouse of Bourg and were named the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille...

Greater changes were on the horizon in 2007 as seven individual congregations of Sisters of St. Joseph merged and became the Congregation

of the Sisters of St. Joseph. We said “Welcome” and “Goodbye” at the same moment during the General Chapter of 2007 as we deliberately turned our individual name tags to reflect the change...

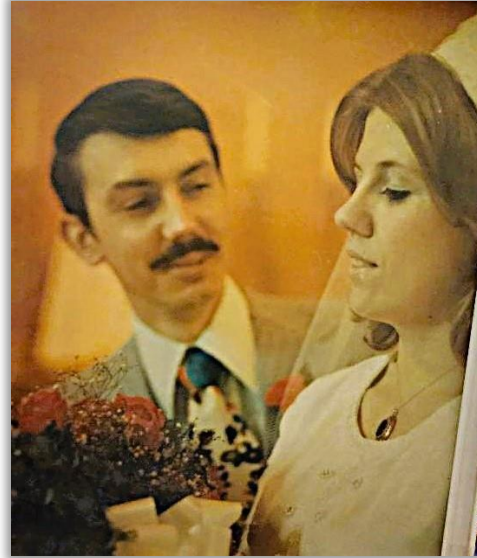
It was sad to sell “Marywood” when the numbers of Sisters diminished during the ‘70s...

The four of us living in Crookston regard the community-owned facilities in Wichita, Kansas, and Kalamazoo, Michigan, as gifts allowing us to live in a larger CSJ community...

We believe that the Holy Spirit is showing us the way and we are freely choosing to follow those directions. It is the way of the Sisters of St. Joseph; we live the theme of “Welcome and Goodbye.”



*Pat Foley (Formerly Sister Mary Damien)
After Leaving the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1969*



Bride of John Ruffing, April 15, 1972

My marriage to John Ruffing took place on April 15, 1972, at St. Albert the Great Catholic Church, in Minneapolis, with my brother, the Reverend Gerald Foley, officiating, and the choir was composed of 13 of my St. Joseph nun friends and former-nun friends. John and I have been married for close to 53 years now, and we have five children and seven grandchildren.

I have kept in contact with a few Sisters of St. Joseph, and with my fellow former nuns who are friends forever, but few are still alive. Each passing year brings more “Au revoir, jusqu'à ce que nous nous rencontrions à nouveau au Ciel!” (“Farewell, until we meet again in Heaven!”)

*~ Guest Editor Pat (Foley) Ruffing
French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota
Board Member*

** NOTE: Permission is granted to include excerpts from Sister Mary Pat Murphy's “Welcome and Goodbye” article, from the “Our Northland Diocese,” Tuesday, 18 April 2023, courtesy of the Catholic Diocese of Crookston, per Janelle C. Gergen, Chancellor / Chief Operating Officer, Diocese of Crookston.*