

# A brief history of Saint Mother Theodore Guerin

## Early life

Saint Mother Theodore Guerin — Anne-Thérèse Guerin — was born into a sea-faring family Oct. 2, 1798, in the village of Etables-sur-Mer in Brittany, France.

Her desire to be close to God began when she was a young child. She was allowed to receive her First Communion at the age of 10 and, at that time, told the parish priest that someday she would dedicate herself to God and to God's work.

Anne-Thérèse was educated by her mother, Isabelle Guerin, who centered the lessons on religion and Scripture. Anne-Thérèse's father, Laurent, an officer in the French Navy under Napoleon Bonaparte, was away from home for long periods of time. Anne-Thérèse was 15 years old when her father was murdered by bandits as he traveled home after the French forces were demobilized following the defeat of Napoleon.

For many years following this tragedy, Anne-Thérèse accepted the responsibility of caring for her mother and her younger sister, as well as the family's home and garden.



*This shrine is at the site of Mother Theodore's birthplace in Etables, France. Photo credit/copyright: Jean Michel Daoudal.*

## Entrance into religious life

Isabelle Guerin sensed that her daughter, Anne-Thérèse, was called by God, but she was reluctant to let her daughter leave to enter a religious congregation. Finally, one evening,

Isabelle said, “My daughter, you may leave now; you have your mother’s consent and her blessing. I can no longer refuse God the sacrifice that he asks of me.”

Less than two months before her 25th birthday – on August 18, 1823 – Anne-Thérèse entered the Sisters of Providence of Ruillé sur-Loir, France, a young community of women religious who served as teachers and cared for the sick poor. As a religious, she was known as Sister St. Theodore. Below you can read the vow pronounced by Saint Mother Theodore.



*This scene of religious life at Ruillé is from a diorama on display at Providence Center, completed by artist Gregory Kamka in 1940.*

### **Vows pronounced by Saint Mother Theodore**

Eternal and almighty God, my creator and sovereign Lord, animated by the desire of consecrating myself to your service under the special protection of the holy Virgin Mary, mother of God, of my holy Guardian Angel, and of all the holy patrons and protectors of the Community, of my full, free and deliberate will, I Sister N.N., make to your divine majesty, for ... the vows of poverty, of chastity, of obedience, and of devoting myself to the service of the poor, either for the instruction of youth or for the care of the sick, in the union of charity in this society: very humbly begging you, O my God, through the merits of Jesus Christ crucified, whom I choose for my divine Spouse, that, as it has pleased you to grant me the grace of consecrating myself to you by these vows, you will be pleased to accord me abundant grace to fulfill them faithfully. Grant, Lord, that I may be until my last breath a perfect image of Jesus crucified, and a victim entirely immolated to your will and your love. Amen.

Throughout the history of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, each Sister of Providence has stood before an assembled faith community and used the following words to proclaim her life as a religious:

Almighty and eternal God, wishing to consecrate myself to your service, under the special protection of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, of my full and deliberate will, I Sister N.N., take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience according to the Constitutions approved by the Holy See

for this Congregation of the Sisters of Providence. Grant me, O my God, the grace to be faithful to them until death. Amen. (*Sept. 8, 1825*)

## First years of religious life



*The motherhouse of the Sisters of Providence of Ruillé.*

Sister St. Theodore spent her initial formation at the motherhouse in Ruillé before she was sent out on mission. Her time at Ruillé was difficult because she became extremely sick and nearly died. Her only hope for recovery was a remedy that forever damaged her digestive system. Due to this cure, she was never able to eat solid foods and existed on only soft foods and liquids. Recurring illnesses from this malady would plague her the rest of her life.

Due to the devastating after effects of the French Revolution, women religious were needed in the mission field. Sister St. Theodore was one of many postulants who received the religious dress and was sent out on mission.

In January 1825, Sister St. Theodore was sent to teach at Preuilly-sur-Claise in a school of the Sisters of Providence of Ruillé. On Sept. 6, 1825, she canonically received the habit and on Sept. 8 pronounced first vows. She then returned to Preuilly to complete the academic year.

## Missions in France

In 1826, Sister St. Theodore was given the daunting task of serving as the superior of St. Aubin Parish at Rennes. This part of the city was filled with devastatingly poor and unchurched people – victims of the aftermath of the French Revolution.

For four years, Sisters of Providence of Ruillé had tried to assist the people but without success. With the appointment of Sister St. Theodore, things began to slowly change. Little by little, the children became disciplined and learned their religious instructions. This change in the children had far-reaching effects upon the entire parish



*This award was presented to Saint Mother Theodore Guerin by the Academy of Angers, France, in 1839.*

In 1834, Sister St. Theodore was named the superior of Soulaines in the Diocese of Angers. In this small parish, Sister St. Theodore continued her teaching and also visited the sick. She was an excellent teacher and was recognized by the Academy of Angers for her pedagogical skills. However, it was through her visitation of the sick that a whole new world was opened to her as she learned the basics of medicine and remedies from a local doctor. It was also while she was in Soulaines that her spiritual life deepened. Sister St. Theodore remained at Soulaines until 1840.

## Discerning a new call

In the summer of 1839, the first bishop of Vincennes, the Most Rev. Simon Gabriel Bruté sent the Rev. Celestine de la Hailandière to France to seek a religious congregation to teach, to introduce religious instruction and to assist the sick in the vast Diocese of Vincennes. With only a few priests and a great influx of Catholic immigrants of French, Irish and German descent, the diocese was in need of assistance.

While Father de la Hailandière was in France, Bishop Bruté died in Vincennes, and de la Hailandière was consecrated bishop of Vincennes. The newly ordained bishop requested the Sisters of Providence of Ruillé for sisters for his young diocese.

Mother Mary Lecor, superior general, knew there was only one person who could undertake such a mission in a new country, and that was Sister St. Theodore. Although she was unsure of such a mission at first, after considerable discernment, Sister St. Theodore finally acquiesced, remembering a sentence from the Rule of the Congregation, “The Sisters will be disposed to go to any part of the world.”

## Leaving France

On July 12, 1840, Sister St. Theodore and five other Sisters of Providence of Ruillé — Sister St. Vincent Ferrer Gagé, Sister Basilide Sénéchal, Sister Olympiade Boyer, Sister Mary Xavier Lerée and Sister Mary Liguori Tiercin — left France for a journey to the unknown. Sister St. Theodore wrote in her journal about this momentous day:

“The moment of separation and of death had come at last. We had to leave all. After having made the most painful sacrifices, which had cost our hearts so much, we had to break the last ties by tearing ourselves away from our dear ‘Providence’ of Ruillé that home so tenderly loved by all the Sisters of Providence.”

The six women religious left Le Havre, France, along the Normandy coast, July 27 on the *Cincinnati*, bound for the United States and a Providence journey.

## Landing on U.S. soil



*The Thralls farmhouse served as the first convent for the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods in 1840. (Drawing by Sister Mary Emmanuel Rinke from water color picture made in 1842 by Sister St. Francis le Fer de la Motte.)*

After an arduous Atlantic voyage, Sister St. Theodore and her traveling companions arrived in New York Harbor on Sept. 4, 1840. This marked an end to one leg of the journey, but many more challenges would have to be faced before the missionary group set foot on the soil at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Ind.

To reach this destination, the sisters would travel by stagecoach, steamboat, canal boat and train. In her journal, Sister St. Theodore described reaching their final destination at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods on Oct. 22, 1840: "We continued to advance into the thick woods till suddenly Father Buteux stopped the carriage and said, 'Come down, Sisters, we have arrived.' What was our astonishment to find ourselves still in the midst of the forest, no village, not even a house in sight. Our guide having given orders to the driver, led us down into a ravine, whence we beheld through the trees on the other side a frame house with a stable and some sheds. 'There,' he said, 'is the house where the postulants have a room, and where you will lodge until your house is ready.'"

In this one house, which was owned by Sarah and Joseph Thralls, the six French Sisters of Providence, the four American postulants and the Thralls family lived for more than a month. In late November 1840, the Diocese of Vincennes purchased the Thralls' home and land. The foundation for the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Ind., had been laid.

## A congregation grows

Mother Theodore (as she became known) and her sister companions faced a daunting task, but trusting in the Providence of God, they set out on the mission before them. Realizing the great need for religious instruction and education, the sisters opened an academy for girls on July 4, 1841. By 1842, Sisters of Providence schools were established in Jasper, Ind., and St. Francisville, Ill.



*This map illustrates the Indiana missions begun by Saint Mother Theodore Guerin.*

By the time of Mother Theodore's death on May 14, 1856, the Sisters of Providence were running the schools at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods and Jasper plus these other schools in Indiana: Vincennes, St. Peter's (now Montgomery), Madison, Fort Wayne, Terre Haute, Evansville, North Madison, Lanesville and Columbus. Mother Theodore also opened two orphanages – one for girls and one for boys – in Vincennes. Additionally, the Congregation had grown from six sisters and four postulants to 67 professed members, nine novices and seven postulants.

## Mother Theodore's death

*The Catholic Telegraph and Advocate in Cincinnati, Ohio, published the following notice about Saint Mother Theodore's death. She died May 14, 1856.*

“Died – At Saint Mary's-of-the-Woods (sic), in the 58th year of her age, Wednesday, 14th inst., Sister St. Theodore, Superior General of the Sisters of Providence in Indiana.

“This woman, distinguished by her eminent virtues, governed the community of which she was the superior from its commencement, to the time of her death, a period of nearly sixteen years. Being a perfect religious herself, and endowed with mental qualities of a high order, she was peculiarly fitted to fill the duties which Providence assigned her.

“Not only her Sisters are bereaved by her death, but all those who knew her excellence and the amount of good she did, join in lamenting that she should have been removed from the sphere of her usefulness. To judge from the celestial expression of her countenance as she lay

in death, there is every reason to believe that she has already taken her abode among the Saints in Heaven, enjoying the munificence of God, who rewards His servants 'according to their works.'"



*A Celtic cross stands as a memorial to Saint Mother Theodore Guerin. Etched in the base are the words: "I sleep, but my heart watches over this house which I have built."*