

St. Rose Philippine Duchesne

by

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If we love Jesus, we shall be loved in return by Him, and that is perfect happiness.

1848

Rose Philippine Duchesne was born into a happy family on August 29, 1769. She was the second daughter, but soon there were six more sisters and a brother.

In France at the time, children were often called by their second name, so little Rose Philippine was called Philippine. One of her patron saints was St. Rose of Lima, the first saint of the Americas. As she grew older, Philippine dreamed of becoming a missionary and teaching the people of America about God's love.

Even when she was small, she wanted to help others. When she was nine years old, there was a terrible flood in Grenoble, the town in France where she lived. Many people became homeless, and the Duchesne family helped them. Philippine even gave her own money to beggars or other people she saw along the streets.

When people asked her why she gave away her money, she answered, "That's what I want to do with it."

Philippine's older sister Marie Adelaide died when Philippine was nine. Now Philippine was the oldest girl in her family, and she felt a big responsibility to do the right thing. Sometimes she was stubborn and sometimes she got into trouble, but as she grew older, she prayed to become more gentle and patient.

The Duchesnes lived next door to their cousins, the Periers, and the two families had twenty children born in 20 years. Imagine the fun with all these cousins! Philippine's best friend was her cousin, Josephine. The two girls learned lessons from a governess while the Perier boys studied with a tutor.

The girls enjoyed the outdoors, too. A school called Ste. Marie d'en Haut was built high above Grenoble, and Philippine and Josephine often climbed the steep street that led up to Ste. Marie. Then they could look down on the town and see where they had climbed.

Missionaries came to Grenoble and spoke of distant lands where they taught about God's love for everyone. A Jesuit missionary named Father Aubert lived in the town, and his stories about the Native Americans in the Louisiana Territory and along the Mississippi River fascinated Philippine.

When Philippine was 12 years old, she and Josephine went to Ste. Marie to prepare for their First Holy Communion. They studied religion, math, history, geography, literature, and needlework. On the Feast of Pentecost, May 19, 1782, Philippine and Josephine received their First Holy Communion. Philippine offered herself to God and decided to become a religious. She prayed the *Memorare* many time a day, asking God to guide her.

She said, "The words *Propagation of the Faith* and *Foreign Missions* and the names of priests destined for them and of religious in far-away lands made my heart thrill."

Let us bear up under our sufferings and leave to God how long and how much we must endure.

1834

When Mr. and Mrs. Duchesne realized that Philippine wanted to become a religious, they took her out of Ste. Marie when she was 14 years old. They were surprised when she did not argue, but she was happy to help with the younger children in the household. She studied with her boy cousins who were tutored by a priest.

She attended balls and concerts and met young men who danced with her. She wore the fashionable clothes of the time - full skirts, broad hats, and fine gloves.

But all the time she was attending parties and enjoying the company of friends, Philippine had not forgotten her vocation. She prayed every day and continued her generosity to the poor.

Two of her sisters married, and when Mr. Duchesne asked Philippine when she planned to marry, she told him that she had pledged herself to God. She wished to be a religious.

Although her parents were not happy about this, she discussed her plans with her aunt, Mrs. Perier. When she was 18, Philippine and her "Tante" Perier walked up the steep hill to Ste. Marie. Tante Perier returned home alone. Philippine had made her decision to join the Visitation order, and she remained at the convent.

A few days later, the Duchesnes went to see her and begged her to return home. She refused, and they also returned home alone.

This was a difficult decision for Philippine, but she knew that her heart and soul belonged to God.

I believe our only hope lies in carrying the cross with Jesus Christ. 1825

This was the time of the French Revolution, and France had many problems. There were riots and unrest among the French people, and Mr. Duchesne realized that religious orders were in danger. When Philippine was about to take her vows as a Visitation nun, her father said she had to wait until she was 25 years old.

Philippine was very disappointed, but a wise priest told her, “Adore God, my child. He has his secret designs in what He allows to happen today. Later on, you will understand.”

Philippine remained at Ste. Marie for 4½ years, but the convent had to close because of the Revolution, and Philippine returned home to her family when she was 23 years old. She helped her mother and took care of her nieces and nephews. Everyone loved her because she was kind and thoughtful.

During this time, priests had to hide because the government would not allow religious instruction. A fugitive priest, Abbe Poidebard lived secretly with the Duchesnes. He said Mass and taught religion to the children. This was dangerous, because anyone taking part in church services could be jailed.

Philippine was sad because Ste. Marie had become a prison. She formed a group called the Ladies of Mercy, and they helped priests who were in hiding or in prison. They also cared for the sick and dying in the town. One day, Philippine found a dying woman. She took her home and brought a priest to give her the Sacrament of the Sick.

This was dangerous, but Philippine did it for God and the people who desperately needed her help. When her family begged her to stop risking her life, she replied, “Let me alone; it is my happiness and glory to serve my Divine Savior.”

At last life in France returned to normal. About this time, Mrs. Duchesne became ill, and Philippine took care of her. A few days before she died, Mrs. Duchesne said, “My soul enjoys perfect peace. I think of God only as a God of Goodness.”

Philippine’s youngest sister was one of her first pupils, and eventually Philippine began to teach poor boys she met on the streets. She promised them meals and clothes to encourage them to come and learn prayers and hymns. They brought their friends, and soon there were about 15 boys in her little class. They taught their parents and some even went to confession and made their First Communion.

Profit by the little trials that come to you, for through them we make real progress.

1834

All this time, Philippine hoped to return to the convent at Ste. Marie. Finally, she was given permission to reopen it, and although people wondered why she wanted to live in a building that was badly damaged, Philippine was happy. She and her workmen repaired what needed repairing. She cleaned, swept, shoveled snow, and mopped up water.

Women came to join the convent, but there were disappointments, too. Some of the women did not agree with Philippine and left. Then Philippine heard about a new order of women whose superior was Madeleine Sophie Barat.

Madeleine Sophie Barat founded the Society of the Sacred Heart in 1800. A priest told her that Philippine Duchesne was a “great and generous soul,” and he thought they should meet. After a long wait, they finally did meet in 1804.

Mother Barat stayed at Ste. Marie, and she and Philippine became close friends. The women who lived at Ste. Marie were not only prayerful, but they enjoyed each others’ company. Philippine, who was now called Mother Duchesne, was especially happy that her beloved Ste. Marie was again a school and convent.

Two of Mother Duchesne’s nieces attended the school, but she loved all the children. One day she played Blind Man’s Bluff with a few of the girls. She took off her bonnet, and the girls put the blindfold over her eyes.

After the game was over, Philippine asked, “Now children, which of you wants to come to America to convert the Illinois? Let everyone who is willing make a pact and give me her hand as a pledge.” Every girl put out her hand, and one of them, Lucille Mathevon, did grow up to be a missionary to the Potawatomi Indians.

He sees all our needs, He knows all our desires, and in His goodness He will fulfill them.

1823

Although she was contented, Mother Duchesne still desired to become a missionary. When she would mention it, Mother Barat always answered, "Wait and pray. Later, perhaps, we may think of it. It is out of the question now."

Meanwhile, in America, Bishop William DuBourg hoped to have missionaries in his huge diocese in the Louisiana Territory. When Mother Duchesne was 48 years old, the bishop came to France and asked Mother Barat to send some of her nuns to St. Louis.

Just as he was leaving the convent in Paris, Mother Duchesne begged, "Your consent, Mother! Give me your consent!"

Mother Barat answered, "Yes, my dear Philippine, I consent, and I shall begin at once to look for companions for you."

In February, 1818, Mother Duchesne told her sisters that she was going to America. "In Paris, I met the Bishop of Louisiana, and it is in his diocese that I shall found a house for the Society."

On February 8, Philippine Duchesne, Octavie Berthold, Eugenie Audé, Marguerite Manteau , and Catherine Lamarre set out for the port of Bordeaux. They waited there for five weeks before they sailed on the *Rebecca* into the Atlantic Ocean.

There were many problems during the voyage across the ocean. Storms raged, it was very hot, and calm winds made the ship drift slowly in the water. A pirate ship stopped the *Rebecca*, and a fire broke out. A partial eclipse and a comet frightened the sailors, and many passengers became seasick.

After this adventure, they reached Louisiana on May 29, 1818, which was the Feast of the Sacred Heart that year. When Mother Duchesne stood on the land, she knelt down and kissed the soil. "No one is looking," she told the others. "You kiss it, too."

At last she was in America. Her dream since childhood had come true!

The five women stayed at the Ursuline convent in New Orleans until they began their trip up the Mississippi River to St. Louis on the first available steamship.

The *Franklin* left on July 12, and it took forty days to travel up the river. The captain had to navigate around sand bars and floating logs and watch for summer storms.

At last, they arrived in St. Louis on August 11. Three weeks later they went to St. Charles because Bishop DuBourg felt that this small town on the Missouri River would become one of the most important cities in America.

We cultivate a very small field for Christ, but we love it, knowing that God does not require great achievements, but a heart that holds back nothing for herself.

1822

On September 14, 1818, Mother Duchesne opened the first free school west of the Mississippi River. The school was in the Duquette mansion, a seven room log cabin. There was one large room with three small rooms on each side.

Pelagie Chouteau and her cousins, Emilie and Therese Pratte were the boarders from St. Louis who lived with the religious. There was no tuition for the day students, and they learned the alphabet, catechism, and math along with the cousins.

When winter came, supplies could not be brought across the frozen river. Mother Duchesne was surprised that they could not have water since they lived by a river, and it was so cold that water in buckets would freeze by the fireplace. No one volunteered to chop wood or get water for the women. The convent had no butter, eggs, fruit or vegetables during the winter, and the only edible oil was bear grease!

Bishop DuBourg suggested that the community should move from St. Charles to Florissant since it was closer to St. Louis. He planned to build a convent for them.

So in September of 1819, the community and their cows, calves, and chickens travelled across the Missouri River. It took seven trips to get all their supplies to the farmhouse where the new school year would begin.

Life was not easy on the Missouri frontier. The religious made their soap, candles for the house and church, altar breads, butter, woolen yarn, and cotton and linen thread. The winters were so cold that ink froze on the point of the quill pens, even beside the fireplace.

Preach by the example of your fervor rather than by words. Example is the very best sermon.

1810

More girls came to board in Florissant, and they loved Mother Duchesne. As a Sunday gouter, she would let the boarders choose what they liked best, and the favorite treat was usually a huge sour cucumber pickle. Mother Duchesne was interested in the girls' games, too, and personally arranged Bible stories to be acted out in the schoolroom.

In the Florissant convent, Mother Duchesne chose a small closet near the chapel for her room. In the evenings, she was the last to go to bed after checking to see that all the windows and doors were locked and all fires and lights were out. Then she would go to the chapel and pray. Sometimes she would fall asleep there and wake at dawn, the first one up to begin a new day.

Although Mother Duchesne could understand English, she did not feel she could teach the students, so she helped in other ways.

Her days were filled with gardening, washing, needlework, and children. Anna Thatcher said, "I was with her a great deal. Being the youngest in the school, my hours of class were short. Nothing made me happier than to plod beside her in the garden, picking up potatoes as she dug them and listening to her quaintly told stories of France and the convents there, of the children in that land which seemed so far away. Then often her stories would be about the people in the Old and New Testaments."

As she grew older, she would mend the students' clothing and shoes during the nights when she could not sleep. The girls were amazed when they woke up and found neatly patched clothes.

She cared for the sick and would bring her sewing and sit by the patient and tell stories to make the time pass more quickly. The students felt that they had a saint for a teacher.

Do not look back to the past, nor forward to the future. Claim only the present for it holds God's will.

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As time went on, the religious opened more Schools of the Sacred Heart, and by 1825, there were six academies in America. Finally, in 1841, Jesuit priests asked if some of the religious could come to Kansas to teach the Potawatomi Indians. Many of the Native Americans were Catholic, and they wanted to learn more about their religion.

By this time, Mother Duchesne was 71 years old, and although she wanted to go to the mission at Sugar Creek, everyone thought she was too old and frail.

Father Peter Verhaegen, who was one of the missionaries, arrived and said, "But she must come, too. Even if she can use only one leg, she will come. Why if we have to carry her all the way on our shoulders, she is coming with us. She may not be able to do much work, but she will assure success to the mission by praying for us. Her very presence will draw all manner of heavenly favor on the work."

So, four religious and two Jesuit priests went from St. Louis, up the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers on a steamship. When they arrived at Westport, now called Kansas City, they travelled overland, and as they travelled Mother Duchesne seemed to grow stronger.

Father Verhaegen introduced her to the Indians by saying, "Here is a religious who has been asking the dear Lord for thirty years to come and teach you, and how happy she is that at last He has heard her prayers."

Everyone wanted to shake hands with her, and they called her "the good old lady." They brought her all sorts of gifts – new eggs, wild plums, even clean straw for her bedroll.

Because she prayed most of the day, the Indians called her "Woman-Who-Prays-Always," that is "Quah-kak-ka-num-ad." Although she felt that she was not really teaching, her love and example influenced everyone more than words and lessons could.

We must all carry the Cross, and only those who know how to carry it are happy.

1818

Mother Duchesne stayed at the Sugar Creek mission for one year, but then she was asked to return to Missouri.

Back in St. Charles, she passed the time by mending and remaking old vestments. She remarked that “needlework is a good occupation for old age.” She wrote that she “never enjoyed reading and sewing more than I do now, when they fill my days with prayer.” She offered two communions a week and daily prayers for the conversion of the Indians whom she continued to love even though she could not actually live with them.

Father Peter DeSmet, another Jesuit missionary, was a great friend to Mother Duchesne, and in the cold winter of 1849, three years before she died, she sent him a package. In her note she wrote, “I trust you will also accept what I am now sending you – two quilts, one of them made of little stars, and the other a larger one, and some small altar linens. It is the gift of a poor person, offered to the poor, who are the true friends of Jesus Christ.”

As she grew older, she attended two or three Masses a day. People noticed that after she received Holy Communion there was a glow that shone from her. One old man said, “I never saw anything like it. Mother Duchesne is a saint.”

The religious also looked at her with love and devotion. Everyone knew she was an example of the spirit of true faith. Toward the end of her life, after daily Mass, she spent the day praying in her room because she could no longer sew or read. In the afternoons, she returned to the chapel for Adoration. She had always given all to God – now she was truly giving her “self” to Him.

After waiting to be with her God for so long, on November 18, 1852, she said, “I give you my heart, my soul, and my life - oh, yes - my life generously.” At noon, she died.

The pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Church wrote,

On the 20th of November, 1852, I, the undersigned, buried the mortal remains of Madame Philippine Duchesne, professed Religious of the Sacred Heart, aged 83 years.

Madame Duchesne was a native of France and came to the United States of America with a small number of Religious of the Sacred Heart in 1818. She may be considered the foundress of all the houses of the Sacred Heart in the United States. Eminent in all virtues of religious life, but especially in humility, she sweetly and calmly departed this life in the odor of sanctity on the 18th day of November, 1852.

How truly blessed we shall be if at the price of even very great sacrifices we shall have made God known and loved by one more soul!

1828

And so the seed took root...

The name "Duchesne" means "of the oak," and strength like that of the oak tree is evident in St. Philippine's life.

As a child, Philippine had an unwavering desire to share God's love with others. She gave her money to the poor and took responsibility for the younger children in the family.

As a young woman, she generously offered herself first to God and secondly to others. She entered the Visitation order, but when the convent was closed and she had to return home, she was dedicated to helping her sick mother, teaching her youngest sister, and eventually working with street children. Philippine and her Ladies of Mercy aided persecuted priests, the sick, and the dying at risk to themselves during a time of great unrest in France.

And when, at last, the Revolution was over, Philippine returned to Ste. Marie and attempted to reopen the convent. When this did not work out as planned, she met Madeleine Sophie Barat, and an unexpected chapter of her life unfolded. New experiences awaited Philippine as she moved from Grenoble to Paris and, of course, to America.

From childhood, Rose Philippine Duchesne's undying hope was to be a missionary, and her zeal and strength of heart allowed this hope to become a reality.

Philippine and the other missionary religious who arrived in America in 1818 established the first school of the Sacred Heart outside Europe. From the simple beginnings in a cabin in St. Charles, Missouri, a network of schools and novitiates were opened in the United States and Canada by the time Philippine died in 1852.

The small "seed Duchesne" that was firmly planted in the love of Jesus had taken root, sprouted, and branched out across the world.