

# MOTHER MARIE-MADELEINE CÉRÉ, SNJM



Welcome to the Céré Building, named for Henriette Céré, foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. Henriette (later Mother Marie-Madeleine) was born on August 20, 1804 on a farm outside of Longueuil, Quebec. She was the third of seventeen children.

Henriette loved the outdoors and was interested in plants and animals. She was adventurous and intelligent, perhaps somewhat of a tomboy. Her father hired a tutor to teach her reading, writing, arithmetic and catechism. She attended a convent school run by the Congregation of Notre Dame for two years, becoming the family reader upon her return.

The Cérés were active Catholics and Henriette led a structured religious life. In 1823 she entered the novitiate of the Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph in Montreal. Poor health obliged her to return home in 1826, where she began teaching her siblings and neighbor children.

Henriette was a demanding teacher and as her pupils excelled her reputation spread. In 1838, at the request of the pastor of Longueuil, she began teaching girls in the parish school. She dreamed of joining or founding a religious community dedicated to education.

In 1843 the bishop of Montreal decided to found such a community. The Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary came into being on October 28, 1843, with Eulalie Durocher (later Mother Marie-Rose) and Mélodie Dufresne (later Sister Marie-Agnès) joining Henriette in Longueuil. Henriette received the name Sister Marie-Madeleine.

The Sisters opened their school with thirteen boarders and ten day pupils. Sister Marie-Madeleine's years as



a successful teacher gave credibility to the young community as neither Eulalie nor Mélodie had adequate pedagogical preparation or teaching experience.

Sister Marie-Madeleine felt teaching was critically important and spent many hours preparing her lessons. Her particular love was teaching catechism. Throughout her life she maintained a soft spot for students who were poor, orphaned, sick, or needed extra help.

Sister Marie-Madeleine was a strict teacher but one who was always good to her pupils. Many years of living alone and being in charge made the transition to community life difficult for her, and she had a reputation for being tactless with the other Sisters. Even so, there is no doubt that she loved religious life. In 1867 she said: "I would rather spend my life under a staircase than leave our Congregation. If they put me out the door, I would immediately come in through the window."

In 1872 Sister Marie-Madeleine retired from teaching, taking on manual jobs around the convent. She adjusted to her new role gracefully, saying "Everything is great in religion." She worked in the garden, repaired books and prayed in the chapel. In 1881 the bishop granted her the right to be called "Mother." She died on January 9, 1885.

Mother Marie-Madeleine's gift to the Congregation was her dedication to teaching. As the community's first skilled teacher she impressed upon those around her that all students, regardless of economic or social position, deserved excellent instruction. This core value continues to live on in the current generation of Holy Names Sisters and their schools.