

# St. Rose Philippine Duchesne

It's hard to find a more substantial definition of missionary zeal than a 72-year-old French nun serving in a mid-18th-century Potawatomi mission. And that's exactly what the godly missionary, St. Rose Philippine Duchesne (1769-1852), wanted to do, even though her life seemed to be going in a different direction at first. Her story is an illustration of the greatness that can come from trusting in God's providence.

Born in southern France in 1769, Duchesne came of age in the years leading up to the French Revolution. Even though she sensed a call to be a missionary early on, at 18, she entered the contemplative Visitation monastery where she went to school, despite her father's objections. The stay there was short-lived, though, because the revolution closed all French religious houses. Forced to return home, Duchesne became immersed in a life dedicated to the works of charity, particularly care for prisoners and the poor. After some leniency shown toward Catholicism by the French government in 1801, Duchesne and some others unsuccessfully attempted to revive their monastery.

Duchesne's life was changed when she met St. Madeleine Sophie Barat, the foundress who accepted Duchesne's request to join her new missionary Society of the Sacred Heart – a religious order founded to teach and serve the poor. Writing to Barat, Duchesne related a powerful spiritual experience during adoration one Holy Thursday, saying, "I spent the entire night in the New World ... carrying the Blessed Sacrament to all parts of the land ... I had all my sacrifices to offer: a mother, sisters, family, my mountain! When you say to me, 'Now I send you', I will respond quickly, 'I go.'" Despite the urgency of her vision, it would be more than a decade until Duchesne's dream was fulfilled.

At the invitation of the Louisiana Territory's Bishop William

Dubourg – who invited St. Elizabeth Ann Seton to her Emmitsburg mission – Duchesne was sent with four companions to teach the French and Indian children in his vast diocese. After a long voyage in 1818, the nuns arrived in the St. Louis suburb of St. Charles, Missouri. Pioneer life proved grueling and difficult for the missionary nuns. Bad weather, hard labor, meager resources, a language barrier and a lack of communication with the order in France were among their hardships. Nonetheless, by God's grace they persevered, opening the first free school in America's newly acquired Louisiana Territory the same year they arrived.

Duchesne established six schools for women by 1828 throughout Louisiana and Missouri, yet she desired further to share her motherly love with the Native Americans. In 1841, at the age of 72, Duchesne served in a mission school for Potawatomi children at Sugar Creek, Kansas. Given her advanced age, many feared that her health would not last, but the head of the mission – the famous Jesuit Father Pierre-Jean De Smet – insisted, "She must come; 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 down all manner of heavenly favors on the work." Duchesne's frail health allowed her to last there only a year, but in that time, she taught the Potawatomi a most important lesson, and she didn't need to know their language to do it. Seeing her lengthy periods of prayer, she earned the native name *Quahkahkanumad*, meaning "the woman who always prays."

Returning to St. Charles a year later, Duchesne lived her remaining decade devoted to prayer, dying on Nov. 18, 1852, at 83. She was canonized in 1988 by Pope John Paul II.

In spite of her often overshadowed and forgotten life, Duchesne teaches much about our Christian vocation when she said, "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 self. ... The truest crosses

are those we do not choose ourselves. ... He who has Jesus has everything." Her feast day is November 18.

## **Did you know?**

St. Rose Philippine Duchesne's relics are kept [at the shrine](#) dedicated to her in St. Charles, Missouri.