



**The life of  
St Philippine Rose Duchesne**

Determined Adaptability Courage

Rose Philippine Duchesne was born on the 29 August 1769 in Grenoble France into a family which was wealthy, successful and actively involved in French politics. Her father was a prominent lawyer and they lived a mansion in Paris.

### **Philippine's childhood**

Philippine was neither a religious nor a domesticated little girl. She refused to play with dolls, never learned to cook, had no use for art or music (essential aspects of education for girls at that time in history). As she was growing up she was teased by her family and friends for the grim determination with which she set herself when she wanted to learn something new. In her childhood years Philippine was often the ring leader when her friends got into trouble and she was well known for her stubbornness and bossiness.

When preparing for her First Communion at her local school Philippine decided that she wanted to live with the nuns as a part of the preparation – over six months. Her school friends who did not realise her determination laughed at her, predicting she would not last a week, she did stay for the whole six months, including waking up for morning prayer before dawn in the cold of winter.

### **Philippine's youth**

At this time, not many parents wanted their daughters to become nuns so Philippine's father removed her from the school when she was 14 years old. At home, until she was eighteen, strong-willed Philippine did not change. Two of her younger sisters married and her parents organised a suitor for her who she liked but refused to marry. When she was nearly nineteen, she convinced her aunt to visit a local convent. Her stubbornness won the day, as after a few months she entered a religious order called the Visitation sisters. However, she never took her vows, as the Revolution had commenced and her father asked her to wait until its effects were known.

The next twelve years were an apprenticeship in being adaptable. Initially, life was at home in a large country house. But very soon this country life was too inactive in a world of turmoil caused by the Revolution. By the time she was twenty three Philippine and a friend moved into a small house and together they were looking after poor children, nursing the sick and hiding priests who were threatened with death. Over the next five years, her parents attempted to find 'more appropriate' housing with relatives, but none of the arrangements suited Philippine's free spirit.

### **Becoming a member of the Society of the Sacred Heart**

By the age of twenty-eight, an independent Philippine continued with her works of charity with the poor and even set up a school for twenty children. Philippine had grand plans to re-establish a convent for the Visitation sisters who she had lived with prior to the Revolution. Plans were made and the community was reformed, however Philippine found that the community members did not fully share her ambitious vision. Philippine was desperately searching for a new community. She heard about the establishment of a little Society which was organised by Fr Varin and led by a young superior Madeleine Sophie Barat. She met with Fr Varin and consequently he recommended to Madeleine Sophie that she should visit her. Madeleine Sophie herself made the long journey from Amiens to Grenoble and was

immediately impressed by Philippine's strength of character and grand vision of an international order of nuns.

So Philippine was accepted into the Society of the Sacred Heart by Madeleine Sophie who stayed for a year to lead them into the spiritual and education philosophy of the Society. The two formed a deep friendship.

During the years that followed the community grew, novices joined, the school was happy. When Madeleine Sophie left them, Philippine was amassing work as secretary to the Superior, Headmistress of the School, the Bursar (person in charge of money) and the person in charge of the health of the convent/school. She thrived on activity, but longed for more and more time to prayer – this she took at the expense of her sleep. In 1815, Philippine was called to Paris to attend a meeting of all leaders of the Society. She thought she was leaving Grenoble for a few months but she was never to see it again. Madeleine Sophie kept her in Paris as her assistant and made her responsible for the Society's finances.

### **Philippine's life in America**

One of Philippines' dreams was to be a missionary to the native Indians in America. The thought of working with the Indians first came to Philippine in her early teens when she heard a missionary priest speak of his experiences. The call of America become stronger each year and reached a climax when a Bishop Dubourg, from the vast diocese of Louisiana, came to Madeleine Sophie to beg for a group of nuns to work in St Louis. In May 1817, after believing the project was agreed in principle, he returned only to find that the Society had decided against it. He was angry, and about to leave, when Philippine, pleaded to Madeleine Sophie to let her go. She thought for a moment and then said 'Yes'.

A 'no-return' two month journey across the Atlantic on a ship called 'Rebecca' was the first challenge for Philippine and four companions. Philippines was 48 years old at the time of the journey! After a short stay in New Orleans, the group set out on a 40 day journey up the Mississippi River to the frontier town of St Louis, Missouri. Philippine opened a school in a log cabin in nearby St Charles. It was a school for the settler's children. There was no scope at this stage to open a school for the native Indians

The story of the next twenty-three years is one of courageous calmness and perseverance, and again of expectations not meet and dreams deferred. The group of nuns endured the hardships of rugged frontier life: a severe climate, cramped lodgings with little privacy, frequent shortages of money and supplies, and devastating illnesses such as cholera. They undertook the hardest tasks that needed doing. They tended livestock, chopped wood, dug potatoes, mended shoes and clothing, made soap and candles, and nursed the sick. But they also established schools that offered an impressive academic curriculum as well as a solid grounding in the Christian faith. The tuition from boarding schools for wealthier girls helped cover the costs of orphanages and running free day schools for poorer students. This work was especially dear to Philippine because it recalled her work during the Revolution when she had helped the poor of Grenoble.

Within twelve years, the sisters opened six schools in Missouri and Louisiana. They were staffed by sixty-four sisters: fourteen from Europe and fifty from the Mississippi Valley who had joined the society. Under Mother Duchesne's leadership, the Society of the Sacred Heart had clearly taken root in American soil. Yet, blinded by her own modesty, she had little

sense of the success of her efforts. She often considered herself a failure, especially as superior, and repeatedly wrote to Mother Barat asking to be relieved of her office. However, many others saw things differently. Philippine was constantly praised both for her hard work and for her deep prayer life.

Although Philippine embraced fully her role as teacher and superior, she never abandoned her dream to go to the Indians. Day after day, she continued to pray that God would grant her desire. Thankfully in 1841, when Philippine was seventy-one years old and in poor health, she was given the opportunity to help start a school among the Potawatomi, at Sugar Creek in Kansas. Philippine was, of course, delighted. When the other sisters questioned the prudence of including Philippine because of her age, Fr. Peter Verhaegen, a Jesuit missionary, insisted: "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 down all manner of heavenly favours." When the group arrived in Sugar Creek, Kansas, five hundred braves rode out in gala dress to welcome them!

Weak and ailing, Philippine could not take up the demands of teaching or even master the Potawatomi language. But she did what she was able to do best: She prayed. As Fr. Verhaegen had prophesied, God poured out immense grace upon the mission.

Philippine spent long hours before the Blessed Sacrament in the log chapel. As she knelt before the tabernacle, lost in prayer, many of the Indians would come into the church to watch her. Noiselessly they would approach her, kneel, and kiss the hem of her worn habit or the fringe of her old shawl. They were also deeply touched by her kindness as she sat with the dying to comfort them. The Indians had the greatest admiration for her, asked her to pray for them, and called her Quah-Kah-Ka-num- ad—"Woman-who-prays-always," wrote one of the sisters. "

But Philippine's joy would be short-lived. Concerned about her poor health, Bishop Peter Kenrick of St. Louis considered it unwise for her to remain in Sugar Creek. Mother Barat soon concurred and wrote to ask her "eldest daughter" to make her "greatest sacrifice" and return to Missouri.

Philippine spent ten more years at St. Charles, where she had established the first school. She remained interested in all the society's foundations and filled her days with prayer and whatever small services she could do: teaching a few French-speaking students, sewing vestments for her missionary friends, mending for her community. When she died on November 18, 1852.

### **Philippine's legacy**

- Mother Rose Philippine Duchesne was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1988.
- The State of Missouri named her first among the women on its Pioneer Roll of Fame.
- In the eyes of the Society of the Sacred Heart she was the first to take the Society beyond the sphere of Europe.
- For us today, Philippine's inspiration is found her personal qualities of determination, adaptability and courageousness.

We acknowledge three of her defining personal characteristics: determination, adaptability and courage.

### **Determination**

One of Philippines' dreams was to be a missionary to the native Indians in America. The thought of working with the Indians first came to Philippine in her early teens when she heard a missionary priest speak of his experiences. It was not until she was the age of 48 that her wish had come true. It was her determination to hold onto this dream that saw its fulfilment, some thirty years later.

### **Adaptability**

Life was extremely hard for women in the 'new land' of Louisiana. The harshness of the weather and the environment and the isolation of location meant that Philippine and her team experienced many struggles and failures. Life was much different to that of civilised Europe. However, Philippine not only survived but thrived, and it was her determination and adaptability which provided the cornerstone for this success. Not only did Philippine had to change many of her behaviours to adapt to the new environment, but she also had to think in new ways.

### **Courage**

To leave Europe to start a life in the 'new world' of the Americas at the age of 48 took courage. Surviving the three month voyage on the tiny ship called Rebecca took courage. To live in the isolated wilderness of frozen winters and scorching summers took courage. To face numerous challenges every day and to keep faith in her mission took courage. What motivated Philippine to continue her work in the face of constant trials and struggle was her enduring courage to follow God's call and her wisdom to pray always.