

On this day: Saint Mother Theodore GuÉrin

Gerelyn Hollingsworth | Oct. 3, 2011 NCR Today

On this day we celebrate the feast of Saint Mother Theodore Guérin who came to Indiana from Brittany in 1840 with five other Sisters of Providence to found Saint Mary-of-the-Woods.

Like so many other founders of women's congregations, Mother Theodore was abused by her ecclesiastical superior.

"The carriage was empty. Sister Mary Xavier was walking slowly and sorrowfully over the bridge. 'Where is Mother?' we asked. 'Where is Mother?' Sister Mary Xavier pressed the hand of Sister St. Francis; it was some time before she could speak. At last she said, 'O mon Dieu! she could not come; the Bishop has excommunicated her and expelled her from the Congregation, and forbidden her to come back to St. Mary's.'

"The date of this unhappy incident was May 20, 1847.

"This culminating act of severity was occasioned by the fact that Mother Theodore had paid a visit to the establishment at Vincennes, which house, the Bishop thought, stood in no need of the Superior General's inspection. On the point of visiting the houses belonging to the Congregation Mother Theodore was inflexible. How could the spirit be maintained, if from time to time they were not visited by the Superiors? The Sisters themselves were unwilling to be sent to missions over which their Mother Superior was not supposed to have jurisdiction."

Life and Life-Work of Mother Theodore Guérin: [1] Foundress of the Sisters of Providence at St.-Mary-of-the-Woods, Vigo County, Indiana, by a Member of the Congregation (Sr. Mary Theodosia Mug), Benziger Brothers, 1904, page 350.

This book may be read free online at Google Books. The story of the "moral torture" of the first Sisters of Providence by a bishop is sadly typical. For examples of what the religious endured, see, e.g., pages 297-300 and Chapters XXIV and XXV.

"After the interview with Bishop de la Hailandiere on May 20th, it seemed that Mother Theodore could bear no more. The sentence pronounced against her, of expulsion from her Congregation and of excommunication as a rebellious subject, brought on a severe illness. The Sisters at Vincennes were overwhelmed with grief, seeing their Mother in this pitiable condition. In spite of their tenderest cares her fever increased. Having asked for a confessor she was given her choice between a young priest only a few days ordained and the Bishop himself. She begged for another. Her request was refused. This left her bereft of all consolation and the spiritual succor her soul needed in this the darkest hour of her life." Page 353.

But things were about to turn around. "Easter's gladness followed Good Friday's sorrow; so in the life of Mother Theodore we have come to the dawning of the Glorious Mysteries." Page 372.

Mother Theodore died on May 14, 1856. She was canonized in 2006.

A new biography of [*Saint Mother Theodore Guérin: Woman of Providence*](#). [2] by Sister Diane Ris, SP, and Sister Joseph Eleanor Ryan, SP, was published last month.

See page 252 for Booth Tarkington's beautiful tribute to "old St. Mary's", where his mother went to school.

Click [here](#) [3] to visit the admirable web site of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods.

At the top are links to information about the congregation. Click History for links to Her-story, Civil War service, archives, etc.

In the archives are [the entrance books](#), [4] digitally preserved, which "not only include the woman's religious name, but, in most cases, birth name, date of birth, place of birth and parents' names. Entries include the date of the sister's death." Scroll down half way to read the names, starting with Mother Theodore's.

A precious artifact is ["Saint Mother Theodore Guerin's journal"](#), [5] written in French, which began with her arrival on Oct. 22, 1840. The journal ends shortly before her death on May 14, 1856."

Click [here](#) [6] for the Wedding gown tradition. From that:

"Another sister familiar with the wedding gown tradition from her years in the sewing room is Sister Mary Loyola Bender. She ministered in the sewing room from 1939 to 1968. Sister Mary Loyola recalls that as the wedding gowns became old and not as attractive, the Congregation would find other uses for them.

'One use we found for them was to rip up the gown and use the material as lining for the coffins when a sister died,' she said."

Click on the links at the right of the page for information about other aspects of life in the congregation. From Sisters habits:

"The cap should be worn just in front of the serre-tête facing and should fasten or rest about 1/8-inch from the edge of serre-tête on the sides. The veil covers the tips and fastens beneath them on the serre-tête eyelet."

Click [here](#) [7] for Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College.

Click [here](#) [8] to see a daguerreotype of Saint Mother Theodore.

A very happy feast day to the Sisters of Providence, their students and alumnae/i, their families, friends, and Associates, and to all who have benefited from their service!

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Links:

[1] http://books.google.com/books?pg=PR1&dq=Life+and+Life-Work+of+Mother+Theodore+Guerin,+Introduction&ei=BwmJTrT2KoTcgQf3g4D6Cg&ct=result&id=FRaEmV9Y37EC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Saint+Mother+Theodore+Guerin&hl=en&ei=fRiJTuiGCM35Cg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CDgQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&

[2] http://books.google.com/books?id=FRaEmV9Y37EC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Saint+Mother+Theodore+Guerin&hl=en&ei=fRiJTuiGCM35Cg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CDgQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&

- [3] <http://www.spsmw.org/sisters-of-providence/saint-mother-theodore.aspx>
- [4] <http://www.spsmw.org/archives/gems-from-the-archives/entrance-book-digitally-preserved.aspx>
- [5] <http://www.spsmw.org/archives/gems-from-the-archives/conserving-and-digitizing-a-saints-journal.aspx>
- [6] <http://www.spsmw.org/sisters-of-providence/history/her-story/wedding-gown-tradition.aspx>
- [7] <http://www.smwc.edu/>
- [8] http://farm5.static.flickr.com/4023/4435402180_8c86d9ff5a.jpg