



**M**other Theodore came to the United States from France in 1840 to establish a Congregation of women religious in a dense forest adjacent to a remote community known as Saint Mary-of-the-Woods near Terre Haute, Ind. Primitive conditions greeted her and her five companions after a tumultuous journey of more than three months.

A humble beginning was nothing new for Mother Theodore, who was born Anne-Thérèse Guerin, Oct. 2, 1798, in the village of Etalles in Brittany, France. She lived with her mother, father and three siblings in a cottage not far from the Atlantic Ocean. Her two brothers died at a young age. Her father, who had served in Napoleon's Navy, was murdered by a robber. Her mother never fully recovered from the tragedy of her father's death. Only her sister outlived her.

At a young age, Anne-Thérèse had a fondness for the ocean and beaches. She nurtured her love of God through prayer while enjoying nature's beauty. At age 20, she asked her mother's permission to join a religious order. Her mother refused. Five years later, her mother agreed to let her daughter follow her heart. She entered the Sisters of Providence of Ruillé, France, Aug. 18, 1823. She professed first vows Sept. 8, 1825, and perpetual vows Sept. 5, 1831. She was given the name of Sister St. Theodore.

Sister St. Theodore spent several years as a teacher in France, where she received distinguished honors for her teaching and administrative abilities. She also ministered to the sick.

Across her beloved ocean, pioneer life was changing rapidly in central regions of the United States. Population was growing, and, along with it, the need for spiritual and educational guidance. The Most Reverend Simon Bruté, bishop of the Diocese of Vincennes in the 1830s, had a desire for sisters to minister in the diocese. He dispatched a colleague to France to find a congregation that would be willing to assist.

The superior of the Sisters of Providence of Ruillé believed only one of the Congregation's sisters could lead the mission. Her choice was Sister St. Theodore. Sister St. Theodore was reluctant to accept the challenge, mostly because of health problems. After intense prayer and discernment, and words of encouragement, she agreed, and began the arduous journey that eventually led her to Indiana.

In her new homeland, she and her companion sisters started right away on their mission and opened an academy for girls less than nine months after their arrival in Indiana. Soon thereafter, under Mother Theodore's leadership, 10 schools were founded throughout Indiana and one in Illinois before expansion into other areas such as Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles.

Mother Theodore suffered from illness most of her life. She was treated for a disease at an early age, and the treatment is believed to have damaged her digestive system. She lived on broth and soft foods for many years. Eventually, her condition overtook her, and she died May 14, 1856.

For her heroic life and because she was a model of devotion to God, Mother Theodore was canonized as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church Oct. 15, 2006, in a ceremony presided over by Pope Benedict XVI at The Vatican.

Pope Benedict described Mother Theodore as "a beautiful spiritual figure and a model of Christian life and strength who had infinite confidence in Divine Providence."

At the time of her beatification Pope John Paul II pronounced the life of Mother Theodore Guerin as "a perfect blend of humanness and holiness" when he introduced her to the world during a ceremony in 1998. He also described her as "a model of the best of womanhood."

People who knew her did not forget her. Each had a story to tell about her kindness, her love, her goodness and her devotion. She was an inspiration for others in many ways. Mother Theodore's presence is still strong throughout the Congregation. Her remains rest at a shrine adjacent to the sanctuary in the Church of the Immaculate Conception on the motherhouse grounds.

People throughout the world contact the Congregation for information about its foundress, or to ask for special favors through Mother Theodore's intercession. A Celtic cross in Mother Theodore's memory stands prominently in the Congregation's cemetery bearing the inscription that reads "I sleep, but my heart watches over this house which I have built."





## Mother Theodore Guerin faced challenges that many people still face today

**She** ... and five companion sisters were homeless when they arrived in a dense Indiana forest on a dark October evening in 1840. They lived with a generous local family until a building was completed.

**She** ... experienced tragedies in her early life. Her two brothers died in fires and her father was murdered on his way home by a bandit.

**She** ... handled challenging family issues. Her mother could not cope with her father's death.

**She** ... learned survival skills. She and her companion sisters planted and cared for gardens to supplement their food supply. They helped care for livestock. Their cabin was so cold that their bread froze. Still they endured.

**She** ... developed a keen sense of financial knowledge, including how to raise money and manage it to its fullest benefit. She depended on the generosity of her neighbors, and she worked to secure long-term resources that supported the young Congregation.

**She** ... became a businesswoman. Within a year of arriving in Indiana, she established the Academy, now known as Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. She handled negotiations for construction and materials. She often met with area business leaders and newspaper staffs.

**She** ... suffered from major health problems. Treatment for a disease early in her life caused severe damage to her digestive system. She survived on broth and soft foods only for many years before her death.

**She** ... experienced prejudice. Many people weren't accepting of Catholics in the 1840s, especially Catholic women who tried to do business in a "man's world."

**She** ... knew how to turn to prayer to cope with the many challenges that confronted her. She placed complete trust in God for survival, and asked for God's support in establishing schools throughout Indiana, and leading the young Congregation.



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OF SAINT MARY-OF-THE-WOODS  
Breaking boundaries, creating hope!



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