

The process within the Roman Catholic Church which may one day result in the canonization of Emilie Gamelin as a saint was initiated in 1981. Evelyn Underhill, another 19th century woman and a well-known writer on mysticism, said about saints, "It is a mistake to think of the saints as dead examples. They are, like ourselves, members of the mystical Body of Christ, living, real and ardent spirits, and it is often through them that God's life reaches us. Saints are simply the men and women who have responded fully to God's demands upon them."

The lives of loving and heroic persons often seem to be unremarkable in the beginning. So it was with Emilie Tavernier

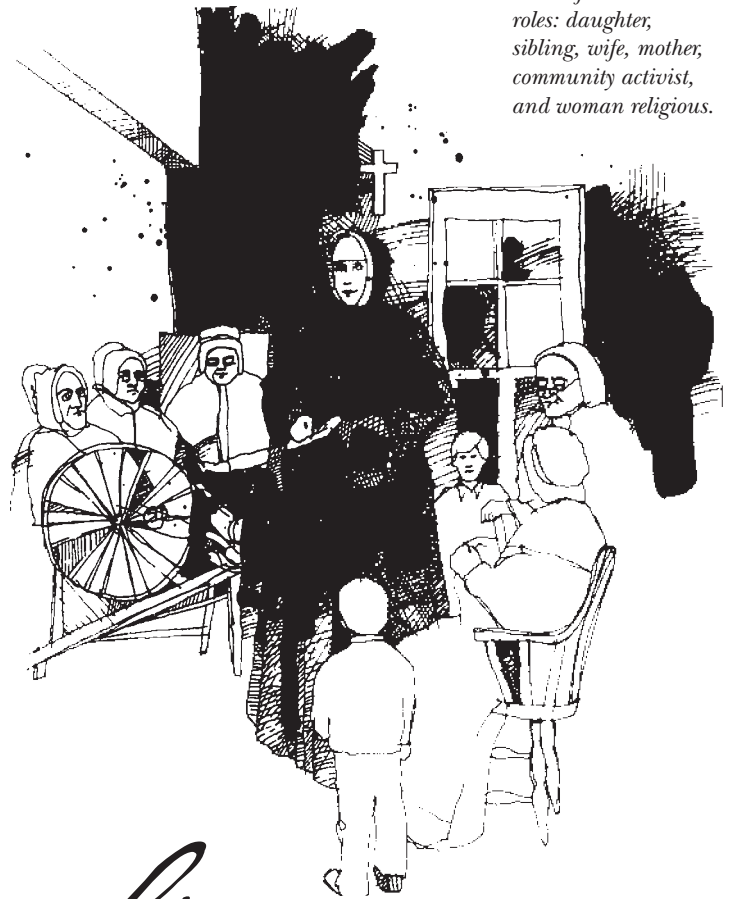


Gamelin, the foundress of the Sisters of Providence religious community, whose life has served as a model for thousands of women religious and lay persons for more than 150 years.

Emilie Gamelin was born in Montreal in 1800. During her lifetime, she filled numerous roles:

daughter, sibling, wife, mother, community activist, and woman religious. While she experienced happiness, she also suffered great tragedy. From the depths of her own personal sorrow grew an intensified calling to serve others, especially people who were most vulnerable, and a responsiveness to the call of religious life.

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*Emilie Gamelin
Foundress of the
Sisters of Providence*

Dedicated to Those Less Fortunate

Emilie was born on February 19, 1800, the youngest of 15 children born to Antoine Tavernier, a wheelwright, and Marie-Josephte Maurice. Nine of the Tavernier children died in infancy. Her mother has been described as frail and delicate in health, but strong and energetic in character. She lavished attention on Emilie and conveyed to her by example a deep interest in those less fortunate than themselves.

Emilie was drawn to helping others from the time she could walk and talk. When she was three years old a man carrying a large bag stopped at the Tavernier home and asked for donations of food or money. Emilie gave him the food her mother had set aside from the family's meal, but broke into tears when she saw how meager the offering looked. The man was soon on his way, but not until Emilie asked and received permission to add to his bag a large box of berries that she had picked as a special treat for her family.

When she was four years old, Emilie experienced her first tragedy – the death of her mother. Emilie was adopted and raised by her aunt, who gave her the best education Montreal had to offer. The death of her father, two brothers, and a sister made grief a familiar visitor. When her brother, Francois, was left a widower, he asked Emilie, who was 18, to take charge of his household. Emilie still cared deeply for people in need and used one of the rooms in her brother's house as a dining room where she fed the hungry who came to their door. It was a frequently used room, this "table of the King." A lively and sociable young woman, Emilie also helped members of her large extended family in Montreal and Quebec City. As she matured, she prayed to know her vocation and thought of entering religious life. However, her life took a different turn.



Emilie Marries

When Emilie was 23, she married Jean-Baptiste Gamelin, a leading citizen of Montreal. Jean-Baptiste was 50 years old at the time of his marriage and financially comfortable. He shared Emilie's heartfelt commitment to people in need and was generous with both his time and his money. While Emilie's friends were less than pleased about her marriage to a man so many years older than she, the two were content. Their happiness, however, lasted less than five years. Their first two sons died within months of their birth. In 1827, Jean-Baptiste died after a lengthy illness and a year later, their third and last child, another son, also died.

Emilie's grief was intense. Only through helping others was she able to ease the anguish she was feeling. Spiritually uniting herself with Mary, Mother of Sorrows, she gave her full attention to the work of the Ladies of Charity in Montreal, a group of women committed to meeting the needs of the city's poor. She soon

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discovered the plight of many elderly women who were neglected or abused by their families.

In 1830, Emilie Gamelin acquired a house where she could care for some of these neglected women. Her first guest was 102 years old. She was soon followed by fifteen other elderly women, and the house quickly became crowded. Although some of Emilie's friends ridiculed her devotion to these older women, many others joined her in raising money and helping at the shelter. Two more houses were acquired, and the need for funds for day-to-day expenses grew dramatically.

One day Emilie prayed at Montreal's Notre Dame church because she did not have money to buy food for the residents. After prayers, she continued on her way to the market where she planned to beg at the stalls. An old man approached her and handed her 23 louis (\$100), saying it was for the poor. Emilie's life is filled with similar incidents in which her trust in Divine Providence allowed her to continue her work.

The refuges were soon overcrowded. Through prayer and the generosity of a benefactor, the group moved into a large building known as the "Yellow House." The guests in this spacious home were now able to work on projects which raised funds to help meet household expenses.

Caring for the Sick

One of Emilie Gamelin's ongoing works was visiting the sick in their homes, particularly those stricken with cholera. In 1832, a ship from an Irish port landed at Grose Ile, Quebec, with all its passengers exposed to this deadly illness. Of the original 192 passengers, 59 had died at sea. Once the ship arrived in Canada, the epidemic spread quickly through Montreal. In six days there were 261 deaths. Emilie came upon six children whose parents had died of the disease. She brought them to the "grandmothers" at the Yellow House where they were warmly welcomed. The work with orphaned children began.

Enlisting Financial Support

Emilie Gamelin continued to use her gift for leading those who were financially well-off to understand and feel compassion for those who were poor. She introduced her friends to charitable work, giving them opportunities to support her ministry financially and personally. One example was a wealthy friend whom she invited to come see her home for the needy. "What have you to show me except for a few half-crazy old women?" he scoffed. But the experience apparently moved him, for he made a large contribution to support Emilie's work.

Angel of the Prisons

The insurrection of 1837, followed by the tragic exile and execution of political prisoners, launched Emilie into new work. Her brother, Francois, was among the French-Canadian patriots imprisoned for rebelling against British rule in Quebec. Because she was held in high regard by the community, Emilie easily obtained permission to visit the prisoners. Every day she brought them food, tobacco, messages, and gifts from their families. One of her most difficult tasks was assisting at the farewells between the condemned men and their families prior to execution or deportation. Conditions at the prison were terrible, and the interventions of Emile and her Ladies of Charity earned her the title, "Angel of the Prisons."



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Serving the Special Needs of the Mentally Ill

Emilie Gamelin's strong interest in the care of people with mental illness and disabilities can be traced to a request made by her husband around the time of his death. Jean-Baptiste had begged her to continue caring for Dodais, a boy with mental disabilities whom he had befriended. Although he was unable to speak, Dodais' cried for help had saved Jean-Baptiste's life after he was attacked by robbers.

Emilie fulfilled Jean-Baptiste's wish and cared for Dodais until he died at age 30. Later, Emilie revealed to her spiritual director that as Dodais lay dying, he was granted the use of speech long enough to thank her for her tender care. Her concern for people with mental illness resulted in the establishment of many institutions of care throughout Quebec.

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Mother Gamelin and Mother Joseph

The religious community of the Sisters of Providence was founded on March 25, 1843. On December 26, 1843 Mother Gamelin welcomed Esther Pariseau (later known as Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart) as the 13th member of the new community.



The two women worked together, expanding the various works of charity in Quebec. When Mother Gamelin died of cholera in 1851, Mother Joseph was her nurse and was at her side when she spoke her last words, "...humility... simplicity...charity."

In 1856, when she was 33, Mother Joseph and four other Sisters of Providence arrived in Vancouver, Washington Territory, bringing to the western United States the mission of compassion which had taken root in Montreal.

The accomplishments of these pioneer sisters continue to be remembered today. A stature of Mother Joseph resides in National Statuary Hall, Washington, D.C., in recognition of her service as "an historic leader of national renown." Most recently, Sisters of Providence in the newly-formed westernmost province in the United States chose to name their province in honor of Mother Joseph. ♦

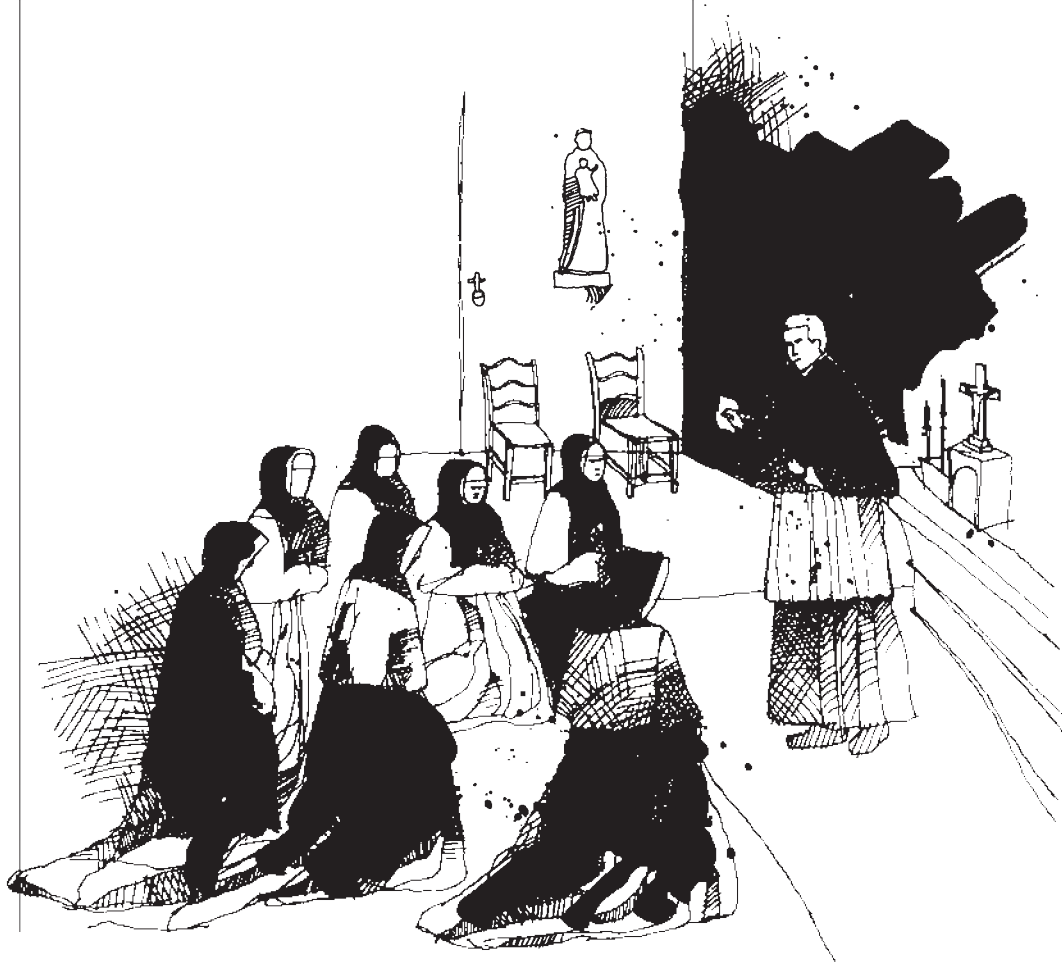
A Community is Founded

In 1841, Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montreal made plans to ask some women religious from Paris to carry on the works founded by Emilie Gamelin. At the same time, Emilie took the necessary steps to have her works civilly incorporated. When the sisters in France sent word that they could not come to Canada, the Bishop decided to found a diocesan order of women religious in Montreal. Although Emilie was unsure how this decision would affect her, one thing was certain: she had no plans to give up working with people in need.

Torn by indecision about her own calling to religious life and dissuaded by her spiritual advisers, Emilie was not among the original group of seven women to enter the new community in March 1843. However, when one of the novices left, Emilie reconsidered and took her place in the novitiate. On March 30, 1844, she became Mother Gamelin, the first Superior General of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Poor – known today as the Sisters of Providence.

*M*other of the Poor

The community grew rapidly under Mother Gamelin's direction, although there were occasional disagreements about the sisters' lives and ministries, as well as continuing financial difficulties. Before she died, the community had 49 sisters and nine houses. The Sisters of Providence early works included ministry to people who were living in poverty, in prison, with mental illness, with hearing impairments and speech disorders, orphans, and others oppressed. Mother Gamelin became known as "Mother of the Poor" and the people called her shelters "Houses of Providence."



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Example to Our Century

Near the end of August 1851, cholera returned to Montreal. Three Sisters of Providence died caring for its victims. On September 23, in the middle of the night, Mother Gamelin awakened a sister saying, "I have the cholera. I am going to die."

At 8 o'clock in the morning she urged the sisters gathered around her to practice the virtues of humility, simplicity, and charity. Before she could complete the work word charity, she slipped into unconsciousness and soon died. She was 51.

The presence of Divine Providence was clearly evident throughout the course of Emilie

Gamelin's life: in her care of the poor, in her presence to those who suffered, and in her response to God's call. Today, the community of the Sisters of Providence serves throughout the world: in the United States, Canada, Chile, Egypt, El Salvador, Cameroon, Argentina, Haiti, and the Philippines. Women and men from all walks of life have formally become Providence Associates, collaborating in the spirituality and mission of the Sisters of Providence without choosing to enter vowed life. Thousands more people continue to share in the ministries of the Sisters of Providence as co-workers and benefactors. As a result, the Providence mission is carried on today with the same spirit of compassion that inspired Mother Gamelin, her life, and her works. ♦

Steps to Sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church



- 1. Petition of the Cause.** The petition for the Cause of Mother Emilie Gamelin was entered officially on October 8, 1977. The petition was signed on October 26, 1977, requesting that the Church give permission to introduce the Cause for Mother Gamelin.
- 2. Canonical Introduction of the Proceedings for Beatification.** Permission was granted to introduce the proceedings for the Beatification of Mother Emilie Gamelin. The decree was officially issued May 31, 1981.
- 3. Study and Approval of Heroicity of Virtues.** After an exhaustive investigation of the life and virtues of Mother Gamelin, the Church issued a Decree of Venerability on December 23, 1993. Venerable Emilie Gamelin was declared a woman of heroic virtues and recognized particularly as a model for lay people in the Church.
- 4. Study of Miracles Leading to Beatification.** Miracles are authentic intercessions by the candidate for sainthood in response to petitioners' prayers. The presumed miracle attributed to the intercession of Mother Gamelin was submitted to Rome in November 1997. A medical study was completed in December 1999 at the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints. Theologians and cardinals will now examine the case before formal approval is given, at which time Mother Gamelin may become known as Blessed.
- 5. Canonization as a Saint.** This step follows the same procedures as step number 4, including acceptance of at least one more miracle. With final approval of the Pope, Mother Gamelin may be named a saint in the Roman Catholic Church.

